TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU OTSUKA
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
Ex
3
The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil

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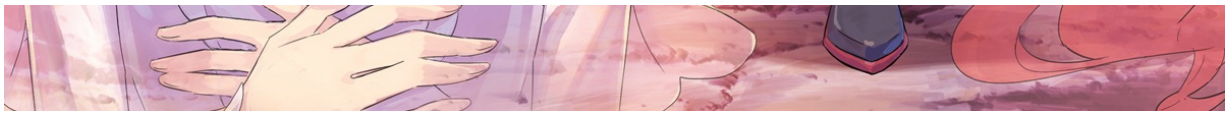
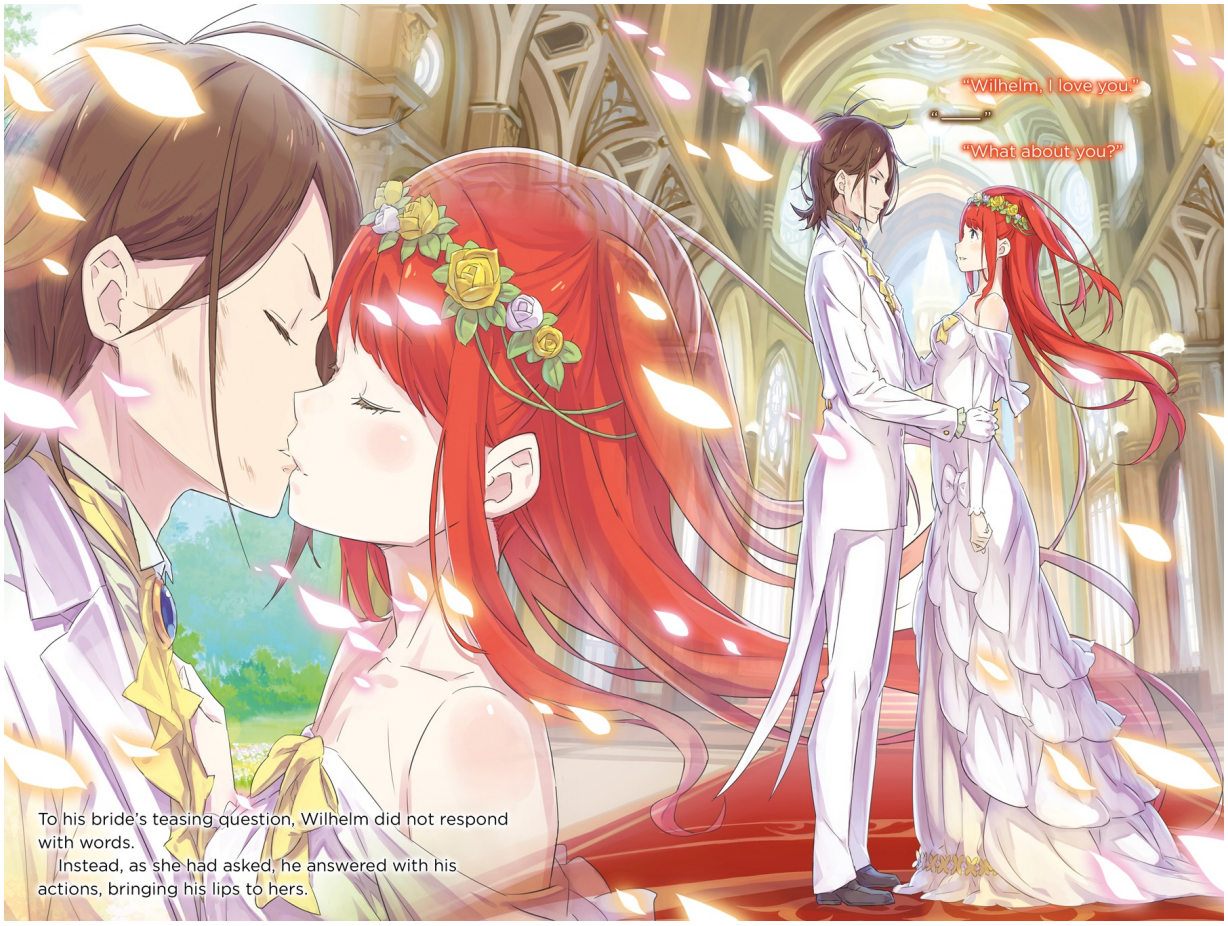
of the Sword Devil



"Now let the proceedings begin. With my own eyes, I shall bear witness to the love song of the Sword Devil."
The king made his declaration from the observation seat.
"Rrruuuu-ahhhhh!!"
Wilhelm howled like an animal, and then his blade cleaved through the crowd.



To his bride's teasing question, Wilhelm did not respond with words.

Instead, as she had asked, he answered with his actions, bringing his lips to hers.

Characters

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

Kurgan

Also called Eight-Arms.
A god of battle who seeks the title of strongest in the Volakian Empire.

Veltol Astrea

Theresia's father. Dotes on his daughter a bit too much.

Jionis Lugunica

King of the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica.

Stride Volakia

A villain who appears in the city of Pictat with Kurgan as his bodyguard.

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Re:ZeRo -Starting Life in Another World- Ex

VOLUME 3

The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Tappei Nagatsuki

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THE LOVE BALLAD OF THE SWORD DEVIL

What Became of Them

1

The light was dim here, and the air was dry.

The place was lonely and cold. Faint illumination from the tepid crystal lights shone chill against the hard stone walls and floor. The wind that found its way underground was cutting, a harsh reminder that the cold season had arrived.

"__"

For a very long while, he had lived totally cut off from the seasons or the passing of time. He had dedicated himself utterly to one single thing, spending the rest of his time on only the most minimal sleeping and eating—he practically lived like an animal.

But those days had ended, and now he was here.

Could he hold his head high and say there had been meaning to his dedication? He didn't know.

"…Hey, you," came a voice. "Yeah, you there. Hey, are you listening to me?"

"__"

"You deaf, new kid? Or maybe you're dead? Heeey!"

The voice reached him where he was leaning absently against the wall.

He lifted his head and looked in the direction of the sound. Among the murky darkness was a set of iron bars, a passageway beyond the barrier, then more bars, and finally the owner of the voice, looking gleefully at him.

Two people, examining each other from behind two sets of iron bars—a picture that revealed that they were in prison.

"Finally bothered to look my way, eh? You've got an awfully big attitude for someone who just got here… Or maybe the poor newcomer, racked with

despair, has decided the world isn't worth paying attention to? Well, whatever! You wouldn't be the first. Mmm? Hang on there. I didn't notice right away 'cause it's so damn dark and you're so damn dirty, but you're pretty young, eh?"

"…alking."

"—? What's that?"

"I said, you sure like talking. You're the type who could chat with himself all day long, am I right?"

The sarcastic barb came reflexively. The unpleasant attitude was a bad habit of his, he remembered. He sighed slightly, playing with the hair on his forehead.

His brusque reply, however, only made his new friend smile even wider. "You're right about that. I love to talk, I love to laugh—if you've heard of Olfe Six-Tongue, that's me. And your luck ran out the minute they put you in the cell across from me. You might end up free or dead…whichever. Till it comes, it'll be just you and me, passin' the time."

"'Six-Tongue'…?"

"It's, whaddayacallit, my nom de crime. They caught me back during the war, when I found six girls in the noble quarter who were lonely and scared, and I went around trying to make the lot of 'em feel better all at once. I told every one of 'em a different story, so I was called Six-Tongue because it was like I had a different tongue to use for each of them."

"So you're a common swindler, or a pimp. Pretty impressive, getting thrown in the royal prison for that." The young man was taken aback by the calm demeanor of the prisoner smiling through the gloom.

He focused his eyes, and indeed, beyond the far set of iron bars was a sensual-looking man with long hair. He was fair skinned and lanky, with a charm and beauty that suggested a touch of high society.

The man who called himself Olfe looked across at the boy. "If you think it's so funny, me being down here, let's hear how amusing *your* life story is. If you don't mind my saying, it's no mean feat, getting tossed in the castle dungeon. What did you do to deserve it, eh?"

"Good question. Me, I…"

He stopped speaking and considered Olfe's question in silence for a moment. The answer soon came to him, however.

"I just took my woman back from a bastard I didn't like."

"__"

"At least, that's what I thought I was doing, but one thing led to another. And here I am." He shook his head in exasperation, letting out a long sigh at the series of events that had led him to prison.

Olfe put a hand to his mouth, but he couldn't contain his explosion of laughter. "Bwa! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Well, hell, kid, you and I are in the same boat!"

"Don't be stupid. I'm nothing like a man who cheated on six people. For me, there was only one."

"There's no difference! It was enough to get you thrown in jail anyway. Was the bastard a noble or a knight? …Or maybe the girl was special. How about it?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination," the young man said after a pause.

Olfe continued to laugh so hard he was slapping his knees, more than happy to let his mind come up with its own take on the subject.

The young man had no intention of telling him the truth. Objectively, however, there really wasn't such a vast difference between his and Olfe's circumstances. At the very least, it was true that both of their troubles involved a woman.

"Ahh, I like you, kiddo. I foresee prison life getting a lot more fun for a while."

"You want to laugh, be my guest," the young man replied. "But I suspect I'm going to disappoint you."

"Hrm?" Olfe grunted.

The answer to his unspoken question came shortly but not from the cell across the hall—instead, it came from the door of the prison, at the stairwell leading up. There was a sharp click of boots landing on stone; it was a royal knight who stopped in front of the cell. He looked down at the young man within and narrowed his eyes behind his visor.

"Get out," he said imperiously. "Someone's here for you." Then he opened the cell door. The young man got to his feet with palpable annoyance, then came out of the cell, the knight glancing at him as if to hurry him up.

"Well now, never thought we'd be saying good-bye so soon," Olfe said, pursing his lips enviously as the knight led the young man by. "I'll be lonely in here by myself. And I'm jealous you seem to have a very kind friend."

"I wonder about that." The young man smiled wryly at the lothario's

words, picturing the “kind friend” who waited for him. Then the youth—Wilhelm Trias—winked and said, “Depending how angry she is, it may turn out to be a death sentence yet.”

And then he left the dungeon.

2

“Would you rather have been executed? It’s not too late to change the sentence, you know.”

When Wilhelm emerged from below ground to the surface, he was greeted by a cool breeze, sunlight, and the quiet growl of his rescuer.

The cell Wilhelm had occupied until just a moment earlier was within the fabled Prison Tower, adjacent to the royal castle. It was famous as the place where the most heinous of criminals were imprisoned, where the guards were every bit as frightening as the inmates.

The beautiful young woman cut a strange figure in a place like this. Even as angry as she obviously was, it was impossible not to fall in love with her at first sight.

She had hair red as flame that fell to her waist, and eyes as blue as the open sky. She had slender, pale limbs and a healthy figure with lovely symmetry. Her features were impeccable; she had an airy beauty like a flower in the sun.

Theresia van Astrea was her name—the name of this handsome and furious young woman.

"Wilhelm?" She fixed him with a stern look, but he had been so taken by the mere sight of her that he had lost his voice. Loath for her to realize it, however, he held up his hands.

"Right, I understand, I'm sorry," he said, giving a pointed shake of the restraints around his hands. "Think you could take these off?"

"Oh, for… I wonder if you really *do* understand."

Annoyed by the perfunctory reply, Theresia nonetheless gave a shake of her right hand. Instantaneously, her pale fingers cut the restraints clean in half.

The wood board that had encased his hands fell noisily to the ground. Wilhelm gently worked his freed wrists, making sure they still had feeling in them. Then he noticed how Theresia was looking at him. She had squinted her round eyes and pursed her lips.

"What's wrong?" Wilhelm asked. "Something happen?"

"What's wrong…? You're the one who was thrown into jail with hardly a word of explanation. Aren't you surprised? Or angry? Don't you want to know what's going on?"

"I crashed a royal ceremony. I'm grateful I managed to escape with my life."

"So you at least recognize the magnitude of what you did… I'm almost a bit surprised." Theresia smirked.

"Eh, y'know," Wilhelm agreed with a shrug.

The commotion Wilhelm had caused had been a matter of tremendous import for the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica. Had it not been for the mercy of His Majesty, Jionis Lugunica—a well-known quality of the ruler—Wilhelm might well have been executed as a traitor.

"You know that if His Majesty hadn't intervened, you might have been put

to death on the spot, right? Has that even sunk in?"

"You think some soldiers could execute the guy who beat the Sword Saint? I know our king isn't renowned for his strategic mastery, but even he wouldn't waste soldiers on something as stupid as that right after a civil war just ended."

"You are much too confident! And irreverent, to boot! I can't believe you're so full of yourself!"

"Besides, there wasn't enough strength in that whole gathering hall to face down you and me."

"And that's the other thing! Don't just assume that I would fight on your side…"

These were not very well-considered proclamations to be making within a stone's throw of the castle, let alone with a knight walking practically alongside.

As a matter of fact, the knight, overhearing their conversation, found his eyes bugging out of his face, but he quickly chose to act as if he hadn't heard anything. It was a wise decision.

Theresia was too busy turning first red and then pale to notice this small act of self-protection.

Wilhelm took a step closer to Theresia and gazed directly into her eyes.

"…Y-yes, what is it?" she said.

"Even with the world against us, I know whose side I would be on. You should, too."

"—! You, sir, simply do not understand people's feelings…!"

"—? I know how you feel better than anyone. You're talking nonsense—are you okay?"

"Wait! Just hold it right there, please. You're going to confuse me to death…!" Theresia looked away, red up to her ears, flailing her arms. Her expression could instantly change at any moment—from anger to exasperation to embarrassment.

パタ
PATA
パタ
PATA
(FLUSTERED)
ぷい
PUI
(TURN)

"__"

No matter how much I see of her, I'll never get tired of it.

How often during their separation had he imagined his reunion with Theresia? But now he found it was nothing like what he had pictured.

The real Theresia, standing there before him, was so much sweeter and more beautiful than anything he had remembered.

"Theresia."

"What?! My mind is very busy right now! And a certain *someone* is to blame for—"

"Come here."

"__"

Wilhelm opened his arms to the yelling, gesticulating Theresia. The curt gesture was enough to leave her with eyes wide, lost for words.

There was a moment of silence and hesitation. Wilhelm simply stood with open arms, waiting for Theresia's reaction.

In the face of this unpretentious act, Theresia could only smile weakly.

"...*Sigh*. I guess this means I lose."

"I think we settled that already."

"Not! What! I! Meant! This is completely different! Sheesh…"

Wilhelm looked genuinely puzzled; Theresia gave him her most annoyed sigh, then took a step forward. She flew into his open arms, nuzzling her forehead against his neck.

Wilhelm embraced her, the heat of her body nearly burning him. Her frame was so delicate it seemed she might snap in two if he hugged her too hard, yet he couldn't keep himself from pulling her in as close as he could.

Each embraced the other as tightly as they could, and from the man's chest, the woman looked up and said, "Welcome home, Wilhelm. You kept this girl waiting for too long."

The man looked down at the woman in his arms and replied, "You're right, Theresia. I'm sorry for making you wait."

To touch Theresia, to see her so close, Wilhelm couldn't help smiling as well.

It was a chance to be so near to each other that their breath mingled, and they could feel each other's pounding hearts—to the two of them, this was as good as a miracle.

"__"

This girl was precious to him, and he had reached her finally, realizing a wish no normal person could have made to come true.

Wilhelm gently stroked Theresia's red hair with a hand hardened by much time holding a sword. Theresia's face softened as she embraced him at last, sharing a moment no one would disrupt. Then she pressed her face back into his chest, breathing his smell deeply.

"Wilhelm."

"What?"

"…You stink."

It was, perhaps, not the most romantic end to their reunion.

3

The Demi-human War, the civil conflict that had plagued the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica for so long, had finally ended.

Nine years of turmoil had been brought to a finish by just one girl—the Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea.

She had a prowess with the blade worthy of the legendary title of Sword Saint, and as she led the royal army to victory, her name became known throughout the land, a feat earned her showers of honor and praise.

This Sword Saint, beautiful and stalwart, was the embodiment of people's hopes and ideals. When a royal ceremony was held commemorating the end of hostilities, people from across the nation crowded in, hoping to get a glimpse of her.

The moment Theresia appeared in the great hall, she was instantly the focus of every eye. If the ceremony had then gone on uninterrupted, she would have been left with an unshakable reputation as the Sword Saint, and her name would have echoed down the history of Lugunica into eternity.

But that was only if nothing had happened—and something did.

"What in the world were you thinking?! You should be ashamed of yourself! Ashamed!"

This shout, the first thing out of the speaker's mouth, rattled the house and echoed into the clear sky. The voice was practically sharp enough to cut, and anyone not accustomed to facing down a sword fighter would have flinched.

In this house, however, there was no one quite so adorably vulnerable.

"…Geez, some welcome. What's wrong with you?"

The shout had hardly faded before a rebuttal had been offered by a man who looked neither adorable nor vulnerable—the object of the shouting himself, Wilhelm.

When it came to this particular conversation partner, Wilhelm's caustic remarks had a tendency to provoke even more shouting. And this time was no exception.

"What do you mean, what's wrong with me?! I can think of a million other things you ought to say before something as stupid as that!"

As usual, the girl in the dress was getting redder and redder. She had gorgeous golden hair that cascaded to her shoulders, and sharp eyes that reflected her strength; she was quite a distinctive woman. If she could have maintained her graciousness, no one would question her claims to nobility, but in point of fact, emotional outbursts like this were more characteristic of her.

Wilhelm had known the girl long enough to be able to make such an appraisal.

She was Carol Remendes, a sword fighter whom Wilhelm had come to know through his duties during the civil war. She was perfectly capable, but what left a deeper impression on Wilhelm than her sword thrusts were her verbal jabs.

Her relationship with him might be best encapsulated by the angry twitch that started above both their eyes when they saw each other.

"Carol, it's all right. I'm glad to know you feel this way, but I'm not angry, so…"

"I know you aren't angry, Lady Theresia, so I'll be angry in your stead!!"

"Oh, for…"

Theresia frowned and shrugged; her attempt to placate Carol had backfired. She stuck out her tongue at Wilhelm in a gesture of resignation, but she couldn't really give up yet. Sadly, Wilhelm had no way to talk Carol down. His only hope was to quickly advance things to the final stage—in which the young man standing beside Carol would clean up the mess for him.

"Grimm, doesn't your woman ever shut up? I can't even have a decent conversation here. Get her to pipe down, like you always do."

"—"

"Don't give me that little smile of yours. This isn't funny at all."

Wilhelm made his grimace a little sterner, but the young man sporting a pleasant expression only smiled more and tapped Carol on the shoulder, shaking his head. That one gesture was enough to douse Carol's flaring anger, convincing her to let it go with a sigh and a dark look.

"…You'd best be thankful to Grimm, Wilhelm. If he and Lady Theresia weren't here, believe me when I say there'd be a lot more than some shouting."

"Mmm. You know, I'm still not used to hearing you say a man's name before mine, Carol. It makes me feel a little lonesome, but I'm happy for you."

"L-Lady Theresia, how could you say that…?"

Her face was red again, not from anger this time but from embarrassment. Theresia gave her an impish smile. The two cheerful young women had the intimacy of sisters, and to see them like this was a pleasant sight.

"…What?" Wilhelm growled, shooting a glance to his side. The young man, Grimm Fauzen, wrote something on a piece of paper he carried and showed it to Wilhelm.

You were smiling.

The paper was how Grimm, who had lost his voice on the battlefield, communicated what he was thinking. But even without it, the expression on his face generally made clear what was in his mind. Such as the fact that at the moment, he was very much teasing Wilhelm.

"Of course I was. What do you take me for?"

"—"

Wilhelm regarded Grimm's silent smirk with indignation. It would have been in character for him to get angry at such mockery, but the smiling, voiceless Grimm looked somehow happy. The grin robbed Wilhelm of the annoyance he was entitled to, mollifying him enough that he didn't have it in him to bite back.

He now realized he had worried them badly enough to give them this level of anxiety.

The four of them were currently in the Sword Saint's apartments, which stood in a corner of the Nobles' District of the capital of Lugunica—in other words, they were in the parlor of Theresia's personal residence. Theresia

had brought Wilhelm here after freeing him from the Prison Tower, and then, brooking no argument, had shoved him into the bath. She instructed him firmly to wash off every bit of nose-prickling stench, and when he had finally cleansed himself with the hot water and returned to the living area, he had been met by an angry shout.

"Why are you two here anyway?"

Once the fiery reunion had cooled down a little, Wilhelm sat on the sofa and belatedly voiced the obvious question.

"This is Theresia's place, right?" he said. "You guys have some business here?"

He ran his hands through his still-wet hair as Grimm and Carol looked at each other. A moment later, Carol sat down across from him and said quietly, "…Why do you *think* we're here? To see you, obviously. And anyway, what's wrong with me being in Lady Theresia's house?"

"In a dress? I didn't hear anything about a ball tonight."

"It's because I didn't have time to change after what *you* did!"

Grasping the hem of her blue dress, Carol exploded once again. Grimm, who sat beside her wincing, was similarly still dressed in his formal military attire. They must have come directly from the ceremony hall.

Wilhelm had unintentionally antagonized Theresia as well. "Hey, now," she said. "Carol and Grimm came here because they were worried about you. If you don't look even a little pleased, and just spend all your time being snippy with them, what are they going to think?"

"Come to think of it, why aren't you in a dress?" Wilhelm asked. "Why'd you change?"

"Huh? Because it got dirty in my fight with you, and because it was hard to move in… Would you rather I hadn't changed?"

"The dress was just unusual because I don't normally see you like that. I don't particularly care either way."

"Is that so…? Then if there's another chance, would you want to see me in a dress again?"

"—?"

Wilhelm was the epitome of "failure to understand," and Theresia responded with brimming eyes. "How can you be so, so dense?! Right when I go out on a limb for you!"

However, she quickly remembered that there were other people in the

room and blushed uncomfortably.

Grimm and Carol were watching Theresia and Wilhelm with looks of surprise. As close as they were to the Sword Devil and the Sword Saint respectively, they had never seen anything like this and would never have imagined it. It was almost as if the Sword Devil was a run-of-the-mill man, and the Sword Saint nothing more than a typical young woman. The titles had taken on lives of their own, lives from which these two people suddenly seemed vastly removed.

"—!"

Carol was the first to break under the emotion at the sight of the pair. She buried her face in Grimm's shoulder, unable to speak. Grimm leaned into his overwhelmed lover, patting her back gently and smiling.

"…Carol has been with me for many, many years. Anytime I went to that field of flowers, she was with me, and she's always worried about me."

In place of Carol, still struggling to regain her composure, Theresia took it upon herself to explain their relationship to Wilhelm. Wilhelm gave a quick tug of his chin to show that he understood.

This explained everything: why Carol was present, and why she had been with Theresia when the latter first took to the field as the Sword Saint.

And, perhaps, how much Carol's heart had been anguished on Theresia's account.

"She's got strange tastes," Wilhelm said.

"…Do you realize you might as well be talking about yourself?" Theresia responded.

"I don't have the slightest idea what you mean." Wilhelm sank into the sofa, feigning ignorance. Theresia merely shrugged. Then she coughed delicately and gave a small bow in Grimm's direction.

"Sorry about this," she said. "He's easily embarrassed and doesn't always know how to express his feelings in words… Although sometimes words aren't enough. He's not a bad person."

It's okay. I know.

"It's a big relief to hear that from you."

I've been with him many years—still haven't seen him evolve from an animal into a person.

"What are you two talking about over there? You not talking about me, are you?"

Easily embarrassed? An animal? One could only let so many insults slide.

Theresia and Grimm, of course, met his question with innocent shakes of their heads. Wilhelm made an exasperated click of his tongue. Theresia put a hand to her mouth, laughing to see him so annoyed. When she regained her composure, she said, "Say, Wilhelm…"

Wilhelm turned his entire body to face her. A serious shade had entered Theresia's blue eyes. Wilhelm unconsciously straightened up; it was a gravity he couldn't ignore.

Theresia hesitated a second when she saw she had his full attention, then dived in.

"This isn't easy to ask, but…what do you want to do next?"

"That's a pretty open question. What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, like from a really broad perspective, maybe? We have to talk about where you're going to live, the work you're going to do. You can live here, of course, and I can give you a stipend so you won't have any trouble meeting your basic needs, but…"

"Hold it."

Wilhelm held up a hand to stop Theresia's increasingly frantic line of thought. She seemed to be rushing to the answers, but there were so many things about the question that nagged at him. With his doubts piling up, Wilhelm furrowed his brow.

"Oh, Wilhelm, there's that frown again… I keep telling you not to do that."

"Let's worry about that later. There's something more important to talk about now… What did you mean by all that?"

"All what…?"

"Like where I was going to live, and my work. I—"

He broke off, feeling a disquieting premonition closing in upon him. He looked Theresia in the face, choosing his words carefully, seriously.

"What *am* I now?"

The question lacked any specificity, was open to endless possible answers. Theresia looked troubled.

"It pains me to say it, but…right now, I don't think you're anything at the moment."

"____"

“To be perfectly blunt…you’re…basically unemployed?”

“…Unemployed.”

Astonished by the sound of the word, Wilhelm gazed at Theresia in wonder. She averted her eyes. He looked to Grimm only to find a wry smile in reply. Finally, Carol glared at him.

“That much should be obvious. You damnable idiot…!” She cursed Wilhelm, her eyes still wet with tears and her face still red.

4

Deserter—went AWOL and then missing for purely personal reasons.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but this was the current statement on Wilhelm Trias’s record, and objectively speaking, it described everything of note.

If there were to be an addendum, it might mention that he had gone AWOL directly after receiving his knighthood, and that he had forfeited both his knightly station and a variety of military commendations, besmirching his status.

“All of which means that your little stunt at the ceremony was written up as nothing more than a garden-variety break-in. Apparently, the object of the theft was without precedent—the Sword Saint’s heart! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Way to go, you master thief, you!”

“I don’t think this is the time to be laughing it up…”

Wilhelm put his head in his hands and exhaled; the giant’s chortling welcome had done nothing for his mood.

He was at the national military base, in one of the offices reserved for the officer corps. It was a simple stone room that held a desk, along with some chairs and a table for receiving visitors, and when the occupant of the room had discovered it was Wilhelm who had come to see him, he quickly put aside his paperwork to offer a roaring welcome.

Wilhelm, however, wasn’t the least bit amused to be greeted with this riotous laughter. Still, when he considered the position he was in, maybe it was only natural he should be received this way.

“A deserter?” Wilhelm said. “So that’s why they threw me in the Prison Tower. With that on my record, I ought to have gone into solitary, but instead

they treated me like an average criminal."

"Just to be clear, after what you did, they would've treated you that way even if you hadn't had desertion on top of it. There was a complaint from your escort at the tower, too. He said he got sick watching you acting all lovey-dovey after you were freed."

The great, muscled man gave a rambunctious laugh. He was the master of this room: Bordeaux Zergev, leader of Zergev Squadron, the kingdom's elite forces.

Two years ago, he had been Wilhelm's direct superior. Even now, with Wilhelm uprooted, the two trusted each other implicitly.

To put it another way, they were close enough that one could laugh heartily while the other frowned and sucked his teeth in displeasure.

"Plan to use that as an excuse to fling me back in a cell?"

"I don't. But you should learn some restraint. 'Course, maybe it's a little late for that, given the show you put on in front of half the damn kingdom. You agree, Miss Theresia?"

"Eerrgh!"

Theresia, sitting beside Wilhelm, reacted with surprise and embarrassment when the focus of attention suddenly shifted to her.

"Gah! What's this, Miss Theresia? That was the cutest little scream."

Bordeaux chuckled. Wilhelm moved to cover the Sword Saint. "Watch it," he said to his former commander. Then he spoke over his shoulder to Theresia. "And you, just calm down a bit."

Theresia ducked her head and stuck out her tongue. "R-right. Sorry. I was only a little startled."

Bordeaux seemed to forget all about his joking as he watched this interaction between the two of them with eyes the size of dinner plates.

"Now, ain't this something. Miss Theresia…I haven't ever known the honored Sword Saint to make a face like that."

"And yet you know her well enough to say that with such confidence?"

"During the two years you were *gone*, Zergev Squadron was on the front lines constantly. That meant working side by side with Miss Theresia. So yeah, I saw plenty of her."

The mention of his two-year absence made Wilhelm fall silent.

Bordeaux, however, took a breath and looked kindly at Theresia. "I won't say I got too many chances to talk with her, though."

“Ahem,” Theresia said. “I must, er, apologize for being so embarrassingly ill-mannered back then…”

“That makes two of us,” Bordeaux answered. “When I think of how things started out, I don’t blame you for not wanting to be friends with me. I should probably count myself lucky I didn’t find myself on the wrong end of your sword!”

“Hey, what exactly happened between you two…?”

Apparently, their relationship had been a turbulent one, and Theresia said nothing to suggest otherwise. It sounded like a miracle that they could even sit politely and laugh together like this.

“Seen Grimm and Miss Carol?” Bordeaux asked.

“I met them at Theresia’s place,” Wilhelm said. “Carol’s still a nag, and Grimm’s still obnoxious for a guy who does nothing but smile.”

“If they look no different than before to you, they’re being considerate. You should be grateful.”

“Hrm?”

Wilhelm gave Bordeaux a suspicious look at this seemingly loaded comment, but his former commander didn’t elaborate. Bordeaux ran a hand through the close-cropped hair on his head, then started in: “So. Why’re you here? I know you. You didn’t come here just to rekindle an old friendship. Go ahead. Come at me with a single stroke, just like you used to.”

“Don’t you tell me—” But then Wilhelm clicked his tongue at his own habit of snappishness. “Sorry, forget what I said. I’m just getting heated.” He straightened up and turned toward Bordeaux. Then he bowed his head to the giant on the other side of the desk. “Bordeaux, I have a favor to ask. I know it might be unreasonable, but—”

“You want to be reinstated as a soldier, am I right?”

“If you’ve already figured it out, that’ll make things quick. I—”

“Let me make something else clear. I’m sorry to tell you this, but it won’t be easy.”

“___”

The resolute look on Wilhelm’s face caused Bordeaux to speak to him with particular gravity. The man known as the Mad Dog crossed his huge arms and regarded Wilhelm severely. The young man’s expression seemed to declare that he wouldn’t be cowed. But while Bordeaux’s gaze was forceful, he wasn’t attempting to intimidate Wilhelm.

“Think back to how you left the army two years ago. You left a note on a single sheet of paper and then vanished, right when the civil war was at its worst… Whatever extenuating circumstances there might have been, objectively speaking, that’s how it’s going to be seen. Knowing that, do you expect anyone to back your reinstatement?”

“I…”

“Sorry. I’m as angry about it as you are. And I’m glad you’ve come back safely. As for your feelings for Miss Theresia, you certainly have my blessing. But the problem here isn’t how I personally feel. None of this is. You understand that?”

Bordeaux wasn’t smiling anymore, and Wilhelm didn’t make a sound.

It was all but impossible to forget how two years before, when he had headed to the field of battle all by himself, he had left notice at the garrison of his intent to depart the royal army. He had been determined. But his resolve had been stubborn and self-centered.

When the land of his birth had been threatened by the flames of war, Wilhelm had thrown away the knighthood he had only just gained, abandoned the military, and gone to help his hometown.

But he didn’t make it in time, returning only to find his village burned and his own life in danger. Ultimately, without a word to the comrades who had gone after him, Wilhelm decided to disappear.

It was absolutely disloyal. The fact that Bordeaux was even willing to see him now was owed entirely to the utter strength of their friendship.

“The way you crashed that ceremony is a problem as well. Obviously, the most important factor is that His Majesty Jionis is a man of tremendous compassion. But your release from prison? That’s because Miss Theresia asked for it.”

“She…what…?”

Bordeaux’s mention of Theresia’s name forced Wilhelm to reflect on how reckless he had been. Theresia twirled her fingers in her red hair, looking somewhat distraught.

“Is that true?” Wilhelm asked.

“Er, well, I guess so, but…it’s not that big a deal, okay?”

“Love’s a hell of a thing!” Bordeaux said. “I heard His Majesty Jionis offered her anything she wanted as a reward for her deeds, and she asked him to use his influence to free you. Now there’s someone who hasn’t got a

greedy bone in her body…"

"It was greedy—I asked for what I wanted most."

"Well, there you have it. You lucky dog." Bordeaux winked; Wilhelm groaned at being teased like this.

Even Wilhelm was not immune to the shock of hearing that. In short, Theresia had been offered her heart's desire for her contribution in ending the Demi-human War, and her only request was for Wilhelm to be released from the Prison Tower. It was as if she had taken every day of those two years she had forced herself to fight and given them to him.

Wilhelm sat in oppressed silence. Bordeaux spoke to him in a remarkably calm voice. "That civil war seemed to go on forever, but it's over now. When they figure out how they want to reorganize the army, they'll be recruiting just as many men as before. How about you forget about the military? Take this chance to live a life of peace." Wilhelm looked up in astonishment, but Bordeaux shook his head gently and went on, "Fighting isn't the only thing there is to life. Cozy up to that woman there, spend a nice, quiet life together—I don't think that would be so bad. Get what I'm saying?"

Bordeaux looked down at the desk where he had set his hands. Wilhelm casually followed his gaze, but then he noticed it. A monocle with a broken lens sitting in one corner of Bordeaux's desk.

At that moment, Wilhelm understood what Bordeaux was really getting at with his exhortations to a life of peace.

"You're both still alive. You both got to see each other again… Can't that be enough for you?"

Bordeaux struggled to keep the emotion out of his voice, but it peeked through anyway. Wilhelm couldn't bear it any longer. "—I think I'll go home for today," he said. "Sorry to bother you, Bordeaux."

"Oh, Wilhelm! Grr! Master Bordeaux, I'm sorry about this. I'll excuse myself, too."

"I'm the one who ought to apologize, not bein' able to offer you a proper welcome," Bordeaux said firmly. Then he added, "Wilhelm."

Wilhelm stopped with his hand on the door. He didn't turn around.

"Listen," Bordeaux said. "Whatever else has happened, I'm glad you're back. If nothing else, that much is true. Even if you are still a damned idiot."

"…I'm only just now realizing what an idiot I've been."

"Savor it. You never did think enough about the people around you, how

your actions affected them."

"Yes, sir, Captain Bordeaux."

For one irony-laced moment, they returned to the relationship they had once shared, and then Wilhelm left Bordeaux's office.

The sound of his shoes on the stone passageway echoed around the hall, and Wilhelm sighed as he thought back over the conversation he'd just had. From beside him, Theresia peered at his face.

"So what are you going to do, Wilhelm? It doesn't look like you have any port in this storm."

"Like I said, I'm going to withdraw for now. I've learned that a frontal attack won't help make up for what I did. I guess I can be glad to have figured out that much."

"Umm… I could try to work things out, if you want."

"I already feel pitied enough; don't make it worse." Wilhelm stopped and pointed at Theresia. She looked at the finger he thrust out at her and groaned uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask you… Are you mad?"

"I think you have a lot more reason to be mad at me."

"You really think so? Right now, I feel like I have a lot more reasons to be happy than to be mad…"

Theresia thought for a moment, then smiled placidly. Watching her put her hands to her chest as if she were embracing something precious, Wilhelm snorted, utterly annoyed.

He looked away from her then, out the window. "…I'm sorry that you had to free me. I didn't know I'd caused you so much trouble."

"It's all right," Theresia replied. "I meant what I said. I simply talked to His Majesty in order to get what I really wanted. I had nothing else to use that request for—I might as well not have had it otherwise."

"But after all you did, I'm still out of a job."

"No need to feel so down… I'll make sure you can live a decent life, okay?" Theresia puffed out her rather impressive chest and smiled even more brightly to encourage Wilhelm. But there were times when a woman's help can wound a man's pride. Especially at a time like this.

Not only did it make him feel helpless, it left Wilhelm with nothing to do but confront his own foolhardiness.

"I told you, you don't have to take care of me."

"No! I didn't mean I would—I was just saying, if it comes down to it, you have my support… Ouch!"

He flicked her forehead for forgetting what he'd said only moments earlier; then as Theresia's eyes brimmed, he pointed out the window. He was pointing down into the castle town, in the direction of Theresia's home.

"Having you with me takes up half the space in my brain. It's impossible to think. Just…go somewhere else."

"You're the worst! That's the worst thing I've ever heard!"

"You're the one who doesn't seem to know how to shut up. I'll be back by tonight. You head back to the house first…"

Wilhelm gave a dismissive flap of his hand and made to walk away, but he stopped when he felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned and found himself looking into Theresia's eyes; she was holding on to his clothing. She looked at his face and her fingers, then murmured, "Huh? Is this…? What is this?"

"Don't start asking those questions. I'll come back. I promise. So calm down."

"…Will you really come home? You won't just disappear for two years?"

"You really worry about everything… Okay. It's my fault. I apologize."

He gently grasped the hand holding his sleeve, then pulled Theresia to him, into an embrace. Theresia tensed for a second, then let that tension drain from her body and relaxed. He stroked her back gently for a moment, then released her. She didn't look anxious anymore.

"Go back to the mansion," he said. "I'll finish my errands and join you soon enough."

"Mm-hmm. I'll have dinner waiting for you. I'll make something you can eat even if it gets cold."

"I'll hurry back when it's still warm."

Wilhelm knew Theresia had no reason to trust him. He pressed a finger to her forehead, then nodded at her, and this time they actually parted ways. He could feel Theresia's gaze boring into him until he rounded the corner, and for both their sakes, he resisted the urge to look back. There would be no end to it if he did.

"I've gotta admit…I'm kind of pathetic."

He could feel them in his bones: Carol's lecture at the apartments, and Bordeaux's argument of just a few minutes ago. The way Wilhelm had cast his relationships aside for two years had come back to haunt him. But he was

only reaping what he had sown.

Sadly, Wilhelm and his bones weren't soft enough to be bent into some new shape by this alone. In fact, he might have been the hardest thing alive in the entire world.

That fact had been a catalyst for the events of the past two years, and standing where he was now, no one could deny the truth of it, nor would he let them.

"____"

Wilhelm frowned and began to think, renewing his resolution. He looked briefly at the scenery outside to find his destination. Then he began walking, his feet moving almost of their own accord.

He was going to a place that had truly stood unchanged for two years.

5

Wilhelm left the castle, winding his way down the flagstone path patrolled by guards.

Two years before, he had always hated going up and down this street. He still didn't like it now, although for different reasons. But he had come to believe that traveling it had a certain meaning and value.

"I guess it's been a while…Pivot."

Wilhelm stopped before a stele engraved with a multitude of names and gave voice to one of them.

It was the name of the former aide-de-camp of Zergev Squadron, and the owner of the broken monocle on Bordeaux's desk—the name of a brother in arms who had laid down his life during the civil war.

Pivot's was not the only name inscribed on the wall; there were many others, countless others. One stone was not enough to contain all the names of the dead; instead, many stelae were lined up there in that small graveyard. This was the army's communal memorial to all those who had been killed in the war.

It was also a place Wilhelm reviled—for in the past, he had never been able to find any meaning in death.

"…I'm sorry. I didn't bring any flowers or anything for you. Hope you don't mind."

Maybe it was because the war was finally over, but there was a vast number of flowers and other offerings.

On the way to the graveyard, he had passed by several guards wearing dark expressions. There was always someone coming or going. Someone looking to speak to those who had lost their lives, to offer them comfort or to ask for answers they could never give.

"____"

Wilhelm had nothing to offer to the dead, nor was he particularly versed in etiquette. So as he stood before the stone, he silently presented a familiar salute. He wasn't in uniform and didn't have his sword, which had been confiscated. He could only offer the barest imitation of the salute, a poor sight to see. Yet his execution of each movement was flawless, and if anyone had been around to observe him, they would surely have been impressed.

Pivot had been a stickler for discipline, had pounded the salute into them. If Wilhelm was going to salute him, he was going to do it in a way that would make the man proud. That, and that alone, was his offering.

"____"

He had nothing further to say. He didn't feel any need.

He hadn't come here because he expected to get anything out of it. But after seeing so many familiar faces, it would have felt wrong not to pay his respects at this place.

That had been all he'd planned on, at any rate. So what were these feelings that tugged at him? Now that Wilhelm had finally gone to see him after so long, was Pivot still as anal retentive and meddlesome as he had been in life?

"Well. An unexpected place to meet an unexpected person."

"You're…"

Wilhelm had turned away from the stone to go back the way he'd come, but those words stopped him. At the entrance to the graveyard was someone regarding him with great interest.

It was a slim man in his mid-thirties. At first glance, he appeared to be a bureaucrat, the kind of person with whom Wilhelm would not have had much acquaintance considering how he spent most of his life among fighting men. But Wilhelm remembered this particular person right away. Back during the war, he had spoken at the strategy conference to which Wilhelm had been invited…

“You’re…Miklotov. That was your name.”

“I’m so pleased you remember me. The honorable Wilhelm Trias. I haven’t forgotten about you for even a single day.”

The man—Miklotov MacMahon, assistant to the prime minister of the kingdom—looked at Wilhelm with great fondness, his perceptive eyes flashing.

6

Just as he had promised, Wilhelm returned home when the sun was half-sunken in the western sky.

Though perhaps home *isn’t quite the right word*, he thought to himself. It was Theresia’s house.

Still, as she greeted him, Theresia was in high spirits. “Good, you came home, like you said you would. Good on you, keeping a promise.” Hearing that, Wilhelm didn’t feel he needed to think of this as anything other than *coming home*.

When Theresia ushered him into the dining area, Wilhelm was surprised. The table wasn’t very large, but every inch of it was crammed with food. The dishes incorporated every color of the rainbow, and Wilhelm couldn’t help but be impressed upon realizing that Theresia’s claims about her cooking had not been empty bragging. But still—

“You made all this? How are we going to eat it? There’s way too much for only two people.”

“It’s all right. Carol and Grimm are going to join us later, and I think four people should be able to handle this, don’t you? Besides, I didn’t know what you like to eat, so… Well, I wanted you to enjoy it, so I made whatever I could. I figure *something* in here should be to your taste, right?”

“I don’t have any particular likes or dislikes when it comes to food.”

“Then why’d I bother making all this?!”

It seemed like too much food even for four people, but maybe Carol or perhaps Theresia herself had an unexpectedly large appetite. Wilhelm tended to eat about as much as the average person, and Grimm a little bit less.

“I’m surprised you’re such a good cook…and that you don’t simply have your servants do it.”

“I can tell what you mean. I don’t like to make people take care of me. I

want to do what I can for myself. So I've only asked for the minimum of help taking care of these apartments. Anyway, it's not like I was around much." Theresia scratched her pale cheek shyly with one finger, an earnest expression on her face.

This mansion was one of the rewards given to Theresia, the Sword Saint. It wasn't one of the things she had received after the conclusion of the civil war; it had been granted to her immediately after her first battle. In other words, this place had belonged to her for the past two years.

The cruelty of the life that prevented her from occupying it beggared belief. It meant she had gone from battle to battle, fighting so constantly that she had never come home.

It was the little facts like this that brought Theresia's life as the Sword Saint into view. And each time that happened, Wilhelm had a thought: that he couldn't leave her alone.

I can't ever again let her hold a sword she doesn't wish for.

"…Wilhelm?" Theresia was looking at him wide-eyed.

Wilhelm placed his hand on her cheek. His fingers slid over her soft skin, and his eyes were pulled to the sight of her lips drawing breath. Her pink lips and warm body—how he longed to embrace them, to play out the full force of what he felt.

"W-Wilhelm… No. Look, uh, d-dinner's getting cold…"

"You said it would be just fine cold."

"B-but, but! Even so, I think warm food is better, don't you?!"

Her voice hit an unusual note as he pulled her close. He brushed the stammering girl's red hair, taking care not to disturb the smooth luster of it as he held her.

The smell, the heartbeat of the man she adored, filled Theresia's eyes with a burgeoning emotion; her breath grew warm—

"—! No, we can't! Carol and Grimm are coming!"

In the end, her self-restraint won out, and she pushed herself away from Wilhelm's chest. Blushing, she straightened her hair as she stood up, steadying her breathing.

"We can't, not today. Let's enjoy a nice meal, the four of us. There's a lot to talk about… Yes! Lots of stuff! Right? Like what you've been doing for the last two years, that sort of thing?"

"I don't think anything I'd have to say would make very good dinner

conversation." Wilhelm was a bit put out at receiving the cold shoulder.

"That's not true!" Theresia responded with a vigorous shake of her head. "Two years is such a long time. So much happens, and it's natural for feelings to change…"

"They haven't."

"And I'm happy to know that! But come on, two years… Hey, you know, it was such tremendous luck that you came back to the capital right on the day of the ceremony."

"It wasn't luck. The whole country was talking about you…"

"Oh! Yes, yes, right…"

Theresia was not very good at concealing what she was thinking, and her replies had already started to grow incoherent. Wilhelm smiled a little at her confusion, but he was also puzzled by it. It really wasn't luck that he had been in the city for the ceremony; he had deliberately arrived in time. But it was more than just gossip that had helped ensure his arrival. In fact…

"Throughout the two years, I heard about you all the time from Roswaal."

"…All the time?"

"Yeah. I wandered all over the country during the last two years, but that woman always managed to hunt me down and get in touch. It's thanks to her that I was able to make it to the ceremony, so I guess I owe her some gratitude."

As he spoke, Wilhelm saw in his mind's eye the woman with the long, indigo hair—Roswaal J. Mathers. Each of her eyes was a different color, and she was someone Wilhelm had known from early on in the war, though he hadn't been particularly pleased about it. Wilhelm had to be careful whenever he saw Roswaal; she always seemed to be trying to meddle in his affairs.

She had been Wilhelm's only visitor during his prodigal years and had met with him many times; she would update him on the state of the royal army or how Theresia was doing. He would always rebuff her, but she was never discouraged.

Indeed, it was because of one of Roswaal's reports that Wilhelm was able to reach the ceremony before it began…

"So you talked with a woman, *all the time*, for two years…"

"Theresia…?"

"Wilhelm, would you give me your hand for a moment?"

"—?"

At first, he wasn't sure what she was mumbling about, but then he saw her face blossom into a smile. Wilhelm's brow furrowed, but he gave her his hand as she asked.

Theresia gave a twist of his wrist, and suddenly Wilhelm's world was turned upside down.

"—Hrr, agh?!"

"I'm not *feeling* quite well," Theresia said, "so I'm going to my room. You, Carol, and Grimm can enjoy dinner together!"

"Wait, do you mean you're sick or that you're angr—?"

"Hmph!"

Theresia offered no quarter to Wilhelm, who found himself with his behind on the floor. He watched her red hair withdraw from the dining area amid a furious clicking of high heels, leaving Wilhelm to blink in total confusion.

"Wh-what the hell…?"

"What was that racket?! What's going—? Wilhelm, did you fall down?"

Wilhelm was sitting there dumbly, still not sure what had caused Theresia's enraged outburst, when Carol appeared, having heard the commotion. From behind her, Grimm shot Wilhelm a dubious look, then gaped when he saw the table.

"What's happened to Lady Theresia? Don't tell me a few rebellious demi-humans have come to get revenge for—"

"No, no, it's nothing as ridiculous as that. I don't know why, but she got really angry, and then she threw me… She *threw* me!"

"Now's not the time for your bruised pride! It takes a lot to anger Lady Theresia. What did you do? What did you say? Why did you make her angry?! Confess!"

Carol interrogated Wilhelm, still reeling from the shock of his defeat. Carol was never the type to control her temper well, and she was never more impatient than when Theresia was involved. Grimm tried to calm her down, but she brushed him away, jabbing a finger at Wilhelm.

"Tell me exactly what happened! After I've heard every last word, I'll decide whether to cut off your head, or find some other way to kill you."

"Calm down already. All I did was talk a little bit about the last two years. How I spent them wandering all over the country, and saw Roswaal a

few times, and then on the day of the ceremony—"

"Lady Mathers?! You mentioned Lady Mathers to her?! You said you met her *several times*?!"

"It's not like I went out of my way to meet up with her. She would randomly find me…"

"That's enough, you cur! I was a fool to ever trust you!"

Wilhelm was dumbstruck by this unexpected contempt. Carol didn't even look at him as she dashed out of the dining area in the direction of Theresia's private room.

"Lady Theresia! Lady Theresia! Steady yourself! Your Carol is here!"

She retreated noisily down the hall and disappeared from the dining area after Theresia. Wilhelm watched her go, still on the ground and still silent.

"___"

Grimm, who hadn't contributed anything to that point, reached out a hand to Wilhelm. The other young man took it and sighed, getting to his feet.

"…What?"

"___"

Grimm looked silently, accusingly, at Wilhelm.

Wilhelm responded with a voice at once sharp but dispirited. "You think this is my fault?"

It's all *your fault.*

The piece of paper appeared so quickly that it was possible Grimm had it ready in advance.

"Damn it."

Wilhelm grabbed the paper and angrily tore it up. Then he balled up the shreds before turning to frown at the dinner table.

They numbered only two, and the enemy was beyond counting—but even so, they would have to challenge those dishes on that table.

"You and me are going to take care of this together…and I'm not going to listen to any objections."

"___"

Grimm could only shrug and sit down. Wilhelm sat across from him, and they both put their hands together in a brief gesture of thanks before they took on their shares.

Everything was still warm, and each new dish delighted Wilhelm's tongue. Yet, he felt lonelier now than if the meal had gone cold.

In the end, Theresia didn't emerge from her room, and the misunderstanding wasn't resolved that night.

"Hmph. Not that I'm convinced this really was a misunderstanding."

The irate remark came from Carol, who had at least shown up for breakfast. After following Theresia into her room and spending the entire night hearing what had happened, the chilly beauty was making no effort to hide her hostility toward Wilhelm. She had always been prickly toward him, but now her gaze was sharper than ever.

"___"

"Oh, Grimm, I'm sorry. I should have been the one to make breakfast…"

Don't worry about it.

Carol's dangerous look softened as she read Grimm's piece of paper.

The breakfast laid out on the table was the work of Grimm, who was wearing a thin smile. His culinary abilities were several steps below Theresia's, but he had been in charge of provisions for Zergev Squadron, and the stuff he prepared was nothing to sneeze at. At the very least, it was far better than anything Wilhelm might have made.

I am the son of an innkeeper, after all.

Grimm appeared downright pleased with himself as Wilhelm watched him write. Then they sat down to eat—the three of them, without Theresia.

"So, what? You were in there all night, and you still didn't get her to come out of her room?"

"That's just how deeply Lady Theresia is hurt. And the whole reason is your attitude and your outrageous behavior. Have a little shame."

"You can't just go around attacking people, my thorny lady. Don't get carried away."

Carol and Wilhelm were at it already, before breakfast had even started.

The relationship between the two of them surrounding the absent Theresia was tremendously complicated. The one thing that was certain was that she was immensely important to both of them. That was precisely what made them so heated this morning. It only took a spark to ignite an explosion, and the breakfast table looked set to become a battlefield…

That's enough.

A piece of paper with the same words written on both sides was shoved between them. The silent shield bearer looked at his war buddy and then his lover, then pointed at the table so the silent pair could see.

His meaning was clear enough: *Let's put it aside and eat.*

Carol was quick to bend and apologize to the uncharacteristically stern-faced Grimm. "…I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get so worked up. Let's have breakfast."

Grimm accepted his lover's apology with a quiet smile. Then he turned once more toward Wilhelm.

"___"

The thin line of his lips was much like the look he had given Carol, but the decisive impetus was missing. Obviously, Wilhelm wasn't one to be intimidated, but neither could he argue about who was in the wrong here.

"…Sorry," he said, looking away, the word virtually an exhalation. Grimm gave a satisfied half nod.

Then, bested by Grimm, Wilhelm finally set about eating.

"I haven't tasted that for a long time," he said, taken aback by how pleasantly familiar the flavor of the salty soup on his tongue was.

Grimm's salty soup had been the meal of choice for their whole squadron whenever they were bivouacking or after they had returned home from an expedition. Maybe there was a rule that being the son of an innkeeper was required to make something so delicious out of whatever happened to be lying around.

Grimm's happiness reached his eyes as he watched Wilhelm's mouth relax into a smile of surprise at the familiar flavor. Then Grimm started scrawling on a fresh piece of paper.

I didn't get to ask you last night—will you be coming back to the army?

The question on the proffered sheet of paper was about what Wilhelm planned to do with himself next. The vigor with which Grimm wrote, the jumpy, broad strokes of his handwriting, showed how invested he was in this question. He had probably barely been able to contain himself while waiting to ask.

There hadn't been a quiet moment to talk the night before when the two of them had been hell-bent on eating enough food to feed four people and then some.

Wilhelm drained the last of his soup, then said to the excited Grimm, "I

talked to Bordeaux about it, but no dice. He did give me a damn earful, though. Acted like he owned the place—"

"That's because he basically does," Carol interjected. "Considering Lord Zergev's actions in the civil war, they're even thinking about asking him to accept a position at headquarters. That would be unusual for a noble, though. So I've heard there's an unofficial offer on the table pending his abdication of his peerage…"

"You seem to know a lot about him. Grimm's gonna get jealous."

Wilhelm was simultaneously mocking both the talk of Bordeaux's promotion and Carol's considerable knowledge of the kingdom's internal politics. His sarcasm, though, was beached on the shores of Carol's next words.

"You can't be a member of a house like mine without learning something about politics. Although I don't know what will become of any of that if Lady Theresia gives up her position as Sword Saint."

Carol's opinion of the position and title of Sword Saint, which Theresia held, was of course no small matter to Wilhelm.

"Wilhelm. I want to see Lady Theresia give me that quiet smile of hers again."

"____"

"To be blunt, I don't care what you do or where you go—*until* it concerns Lady Theresia's happiness. So kindly don't do anything too stupid."

Carol fixed Wilhelm with a piercing stare, her long eyelashes fluttering. The emotion evident in both her gaze and her voice was like a diamond, forged by her many days spent caring for Theresia.

That red-haired girl, beloved of the sword god, had been granted a power she never wished for. Wilhelm wasn't the only one who continued to find her vexing. So…

"Right. I agree. That's the only thing I'll never let myself do." He pulled his chin into a nod, his own feelings strong enough to rival Carol's.

8

After the emotionally charged breakfast, Grimm and Carol left the apartments. To the very end, Carol wouldn't stop raking Wilhelm over the coals about Theresia, while Grimm tried to keep her calm and then left him

with a note that said, *The army and I are waiting for you, Mr. Unemployed.*

"Easy for everyone else to say," Wilhelm muttered. He watched the two of them leave, and once he was by himself in the mansion, he felt drained.

Wilhelm had a mountain of problems; none of them were the kind he could resolve simply by swinging his sword around. And problems that couldn't be resolved by the blade were the problems he had always been most vulnerable to.

The inescapable truth was that Wilhelm had no talent for anything but fighting. As things stood, he felt boxed in.

That girl, the person he loved, had shut herself up in her room, and he had no way to get her out.

He knocked on the door and called, "Theresia, I'm leaving breakfast on the table. Make sure you eat." But there was no answer from the occupant of the room. Wilhelm had only wanted to let her know that he had left enough food for her. But then—

"Oh, and I'm going out now. I'll be back by nighttime, so don't worry… I will have dinner with you tonight."

If he left without saying anything, left her to worry, it would mean he had learned nothing from his reflections on the past two years.

That was what motivated him to tell her. This time, from inside the room, he heard a soft rustling of cloth. He took this to mean that his attempt at communication had been received, then left the house.

Ultimately, having failed to see Theresia for half a day, Wilhelm wandered the morning streets of the capital alone.

Quite a long time had passed since Wilhelm had last walked through the royal city feeling so calm, and he was somewhat taken aback by the subtle changes he noticed. Compared to how the capital had felt two years earlier, in the midst of the Demi-human War, it was like night and day.

It wasn't that the look of the place had changed so much. The greatest differences were the faces, the obvious feelings of the people going to and fro throughout the city. They seemed carefree, as warm and bright as the sunlight.

During the war, the kingdom had been subject to unease and anxiety. Now the shadow of those fears had faded, allowing peace and equanimity to return

to the hearts of the people. A change for the better.

And it was Theresia who had brought this about during two years of labor with her sword.

"____"

Her time as the Sword Saint must have been both painful and absurdly cruel. Wilhelm was conflicted; should the scene before him inspire pride or resentment?

"I have an appointment with the prime minister's assistant. My name is Wilhelm Trias."

"Ah. He's expecting you. Right this way."

Even as these emotions swirled in his heart, Wilhelm's feet carried him to the very summit of the city—Lugunica's royal castle, where he identified himself and his business to the guard at the gate.

He followed the brawny guard silently through the halls of the castle. He had been to the castle many times during his tenure in the royal army, but he had never before experienced coming here on personal business. To him, the castle felt at once familiar and deeply alien. All the more so because the last time Wilhelm had visited was to receive his knighthood…

"The prime minister's assistant is waiting in here."

When the guard's words interrupted his reverie, Wilhelm found himself standing in front of a room that was his destination. He knocked on the imposing wood planks, and a voice from inside quickly answered, "Come in."

When he entered, he found the room surprisingly spartan for the owner of such an august title: only a desk, a sofa and table to receive visitors, and several bookshelves. The way the place oozed practicality deeply reflected the personality of its inhabitant.

"Welcome, my dear Wilhelm," Miklotov said gently. "Please have a seat."

"Right," Wilhelm said, sitting importantly on the sofa.

The slim bureaucrat—Miklotov—languidly seated himself across from Wilhelm. This was the man Wilhelm had come to see, the man who held the key to readmitting him into the royal army.

Or at least, that was the hope that had brought Wilhelm to attend this conversation.

"I'm afraid we weren't much able to talk yesterday," Miklotov said. "I

must apologize for making you come all the way to the castle."

"…No, you're really helping me out, immediately making time for me and all. I should be thanking you."

"Hmm. Well, well. It seems what I heard from Lord Zergev is quite true."

The formalities concluded, Miklotov nodded with a warm smile. Wilhelm raised an eyebrow, but the man across from him waved his hand and said, "Oh, it's nothing. I haven't seen you for four years, not counting…one-sided meetings. When I think back to how you were then, I'm simply impressed by the change."

"One-sided meetings…?"

"Surely there's no need to be surprised. How many people do you think were at that ceremony marking the conclusion of the war? They all know you now."

Miklotov chuckled gleefully; Wilhelm fell into a sullen silence. That unilateral encounter was not something he had much to say about. It was true that, however briefly, his face and name had been the talk of the entire kingdom.

In fact, the ardor of that talk had not yet cooled, though Wilhelm himself didn't know it. He had no idea that some people, captivated by the story of his love for the Sword Saint, had tried to turn the tale into songs, ballads.

But be that as it may—

"A great many people know that you possess the martial prowess to unseat the Sword Saint. Hence, if you desire, your readmittance to the royal army may be readily achieved. You have my guarantee."

"Is that right? That's not what Bordeaux was telling me."

"There is, of course, logic to what Lord Zergev says. The reality is that you forsook your knighthood and commendations, then abandoned the army to pursue personal concerns. There are still many who were disillusioned by that, who were angry."

"____"

"Having said that, time will heal those wounds. What matters is that your abilities with the blade can be of use to the kingdom, and that you yourself wish to return to military service."

Miklotov put a hand to his chin, speaking methodically and logically. Wilhelm felt himself straighten up at the encouraging words of the prime minister's assistant. There was an impassable wall between the soldiers and

the bureaucrats, but nonetheless, this man's view could not be ignored. Perhaps it really was a simple matter for him to restore one soldier.

The return of Wilhelm Trias, the Sword Devil, to the royal army, seemed within sight. But…

"Though your return to military duty may well be recognized, I doubt anyone will accept Miss Theresia's relinquishment of her title."

"Hng…"

The words shook Wilhelm deeply.

When he saw the young man's reaction, Miklotov began to speak more soberly than before. "The army needs the skills of *both* the Sword Devil and the Sword Saint. They have absolutely no reason to let her go. I don't believe there's room for argument on that point, unless…?"

"But she doesn't *want* it."

"Sadly, that's immaterial."

Miklotov spoke coldly, his former warmth swept away in an instant. The prime minister's assistant met the cry of the Sword Devil with emotionless eyes.

"Our dear Theresia may deny her powers, but she will not lose them. What's more, if the kingdom calls upon her for help, she cannot turn it down. Or so I assume."

Assume? No, Miklotov was, in fact, quite certain; he was only pretending to be less than sure. Wilhelm was speechless.

As Miklotov said, Theresia was a kind and loving woman. Even if she had no wish to wield the sword, if the time came when that was needed of her, then she would swallow her pain and do it. Wilhelm understood that. But he didn't want to let her.

"Naturally, everything I've said is but speculation. But I imagine the officers of the royal army will reach similar conclusions. Yes, I strongly suspect as much."

Miklotov dispassionately eviscerated Wilhelm's heartfelt wish. His rejoining the military was one thing, but there was no sign that his concern involving Theresia could be resolved.

Miklotov let out a soft breath to see Wilhelm despondent. "I shall set myself to attending to your reinstatement," he said. "On that count, you need not worry. But as for our dear Theresia… Hmm. I recommend conversation. A good deal of it."

“Conversation?”

“One does not always easily find answers by thinking alone. If someone goes down a wrong path, there is no one to stop them. So instead of fretting over it by yourself, I suggest drawing on the expertise of others.”

Was that supposed to be advice? Wilhelm frowned.

The prime minister’s assistant winked at the young man, his easy smile back once more.

“There are things only you are capable of. Think hard about them.”

9

With Miklotov’s blessing, Wilhelm’s return to the royal army seemed virtually assured. And yet, as he made his way from the castle to the nobles’ quarter, the cloud over Wilhelm’s heart hung as low as ever.

“____”

His head spun with the various things Miklotov had spoken about. In the end, Wilhelm had only found new problems he needed to consider, and he felt more than ever how powerless he was in the face of issues that could not be settled with the blade. It was possible he might be able to regain his old position, but the much more serious problem of Theresia remained.

“Conversation, sure…”

He had already discussed things with everyone he could think of. Grimm and Carol, of course, but Bordeaux and Miklotov, too. He had even leaned on the unspeaking Pivot, and now it seemed the only person left to speak to was Theresia herself.

Yet, if he were to try that, it was only too clear how she would respond. If the country called for her aid, she would hide her pain behind one of her fleeting smiles and do whatever was needed.

“That idiot doesn’t even realize how that makes people around her feel…!”

The Theresia of his imagination was a pathetic object of scorn, yet Wilhelm would have bet his life that he had accurately predicted how she would act. That was why Wilhelm had already played every card he possessed in asking around for advice on this matter.

He groaned as he looked up, painfully aware now how narrow his circle of friends was.

“I hate to say it, but I guess my last hope would be…Roswaal. Where is she anyway?”

He clucked his tongue at the cloudless blue sky.

Roswaal J. Mathers, a specialist in the odd and unexpected, would surely have some effective remedy for Wilhelm’s woes. However, his pride refused to let him rely on her. After all, she was the reason things had become difficult between him and Theresia. Even Wilhelm could tell that if Theresia got so much as a sniff of any further involvement with Roswaal, it could only end badly.

But, trying to both beg and choose at once, Wilhelm quickly found himself running out of options.

“Does anyone really think *my* brain can come up with an answer all by itself? Between everything going on with me and Theresia, my head’s already a jumble. If I could just at least boil it all down to one single problem…”

The ideal solution would address both Wilhelm’s reinstatement and the abdication of Theresia’s title at the same time. But honestly, if he could keep Theresia from ever having to use a sword again, he would even be willing to give up on any chance of rejoining the army. He wouldn’t let himself lose sight of what was truly important. On that point alone, he was now quite clear with himself.

“There’s got to be someone. Someone with half a brain who can boil this all down, someone who can think…”

Did Wilhelm know anyone in whom all these qualities conveniently came together? Suddenly, he stopped.

His mind went, for an instant, to someone almost too perfect: quick-witted, a smooth talker, and a pro at social skills.

“The guy who hoodwinked six girls at once and got thrown in the Prison Tower!”

Wilhelm turned around, narrowing his blue eyes. He saw now that beside the castle, a stone tower, the intimidating prison, had been watching him leave.

"Well, sweet of you to come looking for advice. Brings a tear to my eye, brother."

"Don't get smart with me. We don't have a lot of time."

Wilhelm felt the cold subterranean floor beneath his feet as he stared at the one on the other side of the iron bars. A chortle came from the man with the long hair and clean face—the man who had wooed six noble girls at once and was later imprisoned for the crime of loving too much—Olfe Six-Tongue.

Wilhelm went to visit the man based only on a few hours' acquaintance in jail. Even he didn't think very highly of this choice, but it was the one chance he had to reconsider the problem from a completely different point of view.

"Imagine, though—you're the Sword Devil who outdid the Sword Saint! No wonder you ended up in the Prison Tower. Way to go, you big thief, you!"

Wilhelm responded to Olfe's little joke with intimidation. "These iron bars won't slow me down if I decide to cut you down. You that eager to move up your execution date?"

Olfe, however, showed no sign of being cowed and merely shrugged in response. Well, it certainly spoke to his boldness. This was a man who had chatted up six people at once—all nobles, no less. Not something anyone would do without confidence in the ability to talk their way out of any situation.

"Believe me, brother, I'm dying to help you write your love story, but I just don't see what's in it for me. I never work for free, get me?"

"When I'm readmitted to the military, I'll get my commendations and knighthood back as well. Then I can put in a good word for you. You'll get out of here and be a free man again that much sooner."

"Well, count me in, then! I'll help you; don't you worry. Tell me anything."

"You're prone to quick changes of heart, aren't you…?" said Wilhelm, dumbfounded by the sudden shift in Olfe's attitude, even considering the circumstances. He glossed over most of the minor details, of course, but Olfe

was a skilled listener, and aided by the questions he asked Wilhelm, he soon had a firm grasp of what was going on.

"All right, yeah, I see," Six-Tongue said, nodding emphatically as Wilhelm concluded his talk. "That's a mess, all right. Including your surprisingly large number of personal shortcomings."

"I swear I'll cut you to ribbons."

Wilhelm had intended to strike a bit of fear into Olfe, but the man gave a great clap of his hands. "The way you want to do everything with your sword—that's it!"

Wilhelm blinked at his pronouncement. Olfe drew up to the bars of his cell.

"You said it yourself, right? The sword is what you're good at, and you're not good at anything but the sword. Solving a problem that you can't slice up is tough for you."

"That's exactly the issue. This is one of those problems…"

"Aw, that's where you're wrong, brother. Forcing yourself to confront your weaknesses for the sake of what matters to you is real manly, but it's not smart. Use your head—and your tongue—and push forward logically. Feel me?" Olfe laughed and said, "You're coming at it the wrong way" before nodding at Wilhelm.

And then Six-Tongue gave the Sword Devil an approach to his problem that might as well have come from another dimension.

Specifically—

"If your sword's the only thing you've got going for you, then change this problem into one that you can solve with your blade. That's the only way you can come out on top, right, brother?"

And then Olfe winked at Wilhelm with a naughty little smile.

10

It was dark when Wilhelm returned to the apartments to discover a wonderful smell floating from the dining area. The warm aroma tickled his nose, calling to him. When he opened the door to the dining room, he found himself looking at the back of a red-haired woman who had just finished laying out dinner.

Her elegant shoulders, her narrow waist, the way her hips swayed from

side to side—he felt he could look at her forever and never see enough.

"When you get back, you should say so," the woman said. "You're not a sulking child, so mind your manners."

"I didn't stay quiet because I was sulking."

"Then why did you? Looking for the words to apologize?" Theresia gave a pouty little snort without even turning around.

He could hardly tell her that he'd been silent because his love for her had left him speechless. For a while longer, he let the quiet take the place of his answer, until Theresia gave a sigh of exasperation.

"Gosh, I wish you would just talk to me… And I think you know that."

"Sorry. So what's the story here?"

"…You were the one who said we would eat dinner together. Hmph." With that adorable little sound, Theresia took off her apron and sat down.

This time, the amount of food on the table was more suited to two people. Wilhelm was relieved when he realized there would be no undesired visitors, but then he quailed at the thought of being alone with her for dinner.

That morning, he hadn't been able to say anything to help them make up, but now…

"You made breakfast for me, didn't you, Wilhelm? It was terrible… I couldn't imagine having the same thing for dinner."

"I'm sure I cooked it all the way through."

"You have to do more than just burn it! The center was black as tar! I have to admit, though, the way you cut the ingredients was expert—I thought it was some kind of prank!"

Wilhelm frowned, caught off guard by Theresia's vehemence. Yes, he had misjudged the heat somewhat, but he didn't think the final product could have been called inedible.

Theresia looked like she could tell what he was thinking. She gestured to the seat across from her and said, "I worry how you were eating these past two years… I wonder if there's any chance someone was cooking for you. Someone like, well, you know…"

"If you're thinking of Roswaal, you're wrong. Don't make me repeat myself again and again. She found me on her own. I never welcomed her. And I only thanked her one time."

"What for…?"

"For telling me the day of the ceremony. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been

able to see you." His response was flat and casual.

"O-oh. Well, I—you—heh-heh…"

Theresia blushed, then laughed weakly. Wilhelm, meanwhile, looked at the food.

The quantity of food was much less than the night before, but the variety was just as rich. Not a single dish was the same as anything that had appeared the previous night, shocking Wilhelm with the breadth of Theresia's repertoire.

"You've got a lot of tricks up your sleeve," he said.

"I'm not sure that's a compliment," she answered. "Hee-hee—not that I mind."

Theresia smiled happily at Wilhelm's awkward praise. It was the first time he had seen her really smile in almost a full day.

Wilhelm put a hand to his chest, unexpectedly relieved by that smile.

"Now let's eat," Theresia said. "I'm going to find out what you like—I want to know your opinion on each dish."

"They were all delicious. That's my opinion of last night."

"Well, that won't do today. I'll be watching you, and I'm going to see which foods you enjoy. I'm not going to trust your words."

As terrible as it was, Wilhelm preparing some food for her had apparently lit the fire of Theresia's own desire to display her cooking ability. If that was what it took to bring them back together, then he would gladly accept her criticism of his kitchen skills.

And so dinner proceeded calmly, with Theresia examining Wilhelm's reaction to each dish.

He had already confirmed the day before that she was quite an accomplished chef, but the singular focus on getting through all the food had made it difficult to fully appreciate the special qualities of each dish. Maybe that was why the food tonight seemed so very much more delicious.

"How is it? More satisfying than yesterday?"

"Yeah. I think it tastes better today."

"Really? That's great! Yesterday I focused on food from the southern part of the kingdom, but today is more northern. Maybe you like the flavors they use better."

"I don't know. Maybe it's just 'cause I'm eating with you?"

"Er! Ahem! N-no fair ambushing me like that…!"

It was a casual remark, but Theresia was feeling rather sensitive, and when it reached her ears, she started to choke on her water. Wilhelm smiled a little but then quickly frowned again. This was a lovely dinner they were sharing, but there were things that had to be talked about, and he couldn't put them off forever.

Theresia noted the change in his expression. She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and straightened.

"Theresia, there's something I want to talk about," Wilhelm said.

"Y-yes. Of course…"

"It's about my readmission to the military. I talked a little with someone higher up, and I think I'll be able to get back in. I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble and worry."

"Oh—oh, that! Phew. I thought you were going to say you were leaving or something…"

"…No, and I definitely won't, either. Don't make me repeat myself again and again."

He was realizing how insecure Theresia felt; he didn't know how long it would take to clear away her doubts. From Wilhelm's point of view, in his heart of hearts, there was no one he valued more than her. Although he would have hardly admitted as much even under torture. He couldn't.

"Ah! I'm thrilled that you'll be able to rejoin the army, of course. And I'm sure you'll be happier working with your friends like Grimm and Master Bordeaux again."

"My friends… I'd never thought of them that way."

Brothers in arms, maybe. But not friends.

In any event, Theresia was glad to hear Wilhelm would get back in the military. The one remaining problem was Theresia herself…

"Theresia, there's still something else to talk about. Something even more important."

"Y-yes…?"

"Calm down. It's not what you're thinking. Tomorrow, I'm going to be out all day. I'll probably be back around the same time as today, but…tomorrow, you absolutely must not go to the castle."

"___"

His emphatic tone startled Theresia. She put a finger to her lips, considering his words.

“I have to stay away from the castle? Why?”

“You just have to. Listen to me. I won’t make you regret it.”

“Why would my going to the castle or not be something for me to regret? That makes me more anxious than anything.”

The lack of explanation bothered her, but Wilhelm showed no inclination to clarify. The two glared at each other for a moment, but Theresia folded before the silent Wilhelm. She sighed and gave in: “I understand. You can’t tell me why, but I’m not to go to the castle. The whole day tomorrow—is that correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Please.”

“Well, since you asked so nicely… But can I ask you one thing?”

Theresia covered herself by standing up as if she were about to start clearing the table. Wilhelm looked at her, and she held up one finger.

“If I break that promise…will you hate me?”

“I’ll be very angry.”

“Oh? All right, then.”

She gave a wave of her hand and began taking dishes to the washing area. Wilhelm, watching her hips sway happily from side to side, became lost in thought. The tone of her voice just now perplexed him. Surely she didn’t *intend* to break her promise and come to the castle.

“Well, I told her not to come, so she probably won’t.”

Wilhelm nodded to himself, piled up the rest of the dishes, then followed after Theresia.

11

Theresia saw Wilhelm off early the next morning, and for the third day in a row, he went to the castle.

Today, however, Wilhelm seemed different from the two previous days. Or perhaps the way he’d been acting before was what had been out of character for him.

He strode boldly through the castle gate, the aura he exuded leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind that this was Wilhelm Trias, the Sword Devil, a warrior who had defeated the strongest fighter in the nation.

An armored guard was waiting for the silent Wilhelm by the gate. “Fortune favor you in battle,” he said. His visor hid his expression, but his

face was tight and there was sweat on his forehead. He knew from a glance at Wilhelm. Knew just a fraction of the true power that attended the one once known as the Sword Devil, who had overcome the Sword Saint despite her prodigious achievements.

Wilhelm cut through the castle, moving steadily toward one place and one place only. A training ground rife with the odors of blood and fat jumped into his vision.

The space was surrounded by a huge wall, and several soldiers were there, full of vigor and the lust for battle. This was the place where, day after day, the knights and guards and military forces of the nation tested their combat abilities against one another and constantly sought to improve themselves.

Vitality and a love for all things related to combat were expected in such a place—and only more so when the assembly included all those considered strongest and most distinguished among the kingdom's armed forces.

"So you're here, y'damned jackass idiot."

As soon as Wilhelm entered the center of the training ground, he was met with this verbal assault. The speaker had thick arms and carried a massive battle-ax…

"Bordeaux. I thought you were going to get off the battlefield now that you've moved up in the world."

"Gah-ha-ha! Don't be dumb. I'll be out in the field for the rest of my life. They gave me a promotion—so what? It's not like I'm going to just throw down my weapon. That's one way you and I are the same."

Bordeaux guffawed, staring excitedly at Wilhelm, who stood at the ready. Wilhelm shrugged at the giant, then looked over who else was standing there.

Each and every one of the people assembled were fighters trained to the hilt, not one of them meek or mild. Wilhelm recognized two faces among them.

"Even you guys are here?" he snorted. "You ought to know by now when you're outclassed."

In front of him stood a female knight with golden hair, and a man bearing a shield—Carol and Grimm. Holding aloft their sword and shield, respectively, they nodded in recognition of Wilhelm's barb.

"Don't be too proud of yourself," Carol said. "There's not a person here who doesn't belong to the elite. A careless challenge on your part can only

end in your humiliation."

"I know perfectly well that everyone here is a good fighter. So what are you doing here?"

"Why, you—!"

Carol, please, calm down.

Grimm restrained his red-faced lover, who had swallowed Wilhelm's bait hook, line, and sinker. Then he turned that sweet face of his toward Wilhelm and almost smiled.

We won't hold back, you know.

"At least you finally learned to talk a good game." Wilhelm laughed aloud.

In addition to the three of them, several other warriors who had distinguished themselves during the civil war could be seen. Some were his old companions from his days with Zergev Squadron, and as a whole, the group's readiness to fight was electric, enough to make one's hair stand on end.

"Well, it looks like we're all here now." Into that tense atmosphere on the training ground came an incongruously gentle voice. Wilhelm looked and saw Miklotov, seated where he could observe the entire training field. The prime minister's assistant was wearing a deep blue robe, and he nodded deeply at the gathered fighters.

"A most impressive display," he said. "Already there's such a presence, and we haven't even begun yet."

"I'm not here to put on a show," Wilhelm growled. "Just keep your promise."

Miklotov winked and chuckled at Wilhelm's arrogant tone. Then he looked over his shoulder, gave an elaborate bow, and said, "This way, sire."

Everyone frowned at this, but an instant later, all of them kneeled as one. Yes, even Wilhelm. Why?

"Now, now, there's no need for such obsequiousness. I've only come to observe the outcome."

There was a note of laughter in the voice, which carried easily to every corner of the training ground. The speaker was a man in an elegant robe and dazzling formal clothes. He was somewhere close to his forties and well built— But such common expressions hardly fit this man.

He was, after all, the most exalted person at this training ground, or the

castle, or the capital, or even the whole kingdom.

"His Majesty, Jionis Lugunica."

"A most impressive sight, as Miklotov said. Such a gathering of braves must occur only at times of great import… This might not have been possible were it not immediately after our ceremony."

The man looked pleased with himself. He was indeed Jionis Lugunica, current ruler of the Dragonfriend Kingdom and the one whose power had made this moment possible for Wilhelm.

Jionis looked over his kneeling subjects and, spotting Wilhelm among them, said, "Ha-ha, Trias. Your attitude now seems far more refined than when you came to speak to me yesterday."

"…I was most impudent yesterday, sire. And more, I feel nothing but gratitude toward Your Majesty's generosity for affording me this opportunity."

"Well and good. What you said moved me, and I merely responded accordingly. Moreover, your fight with the Sword Saint during the ceremony was a beautiful thing to behold. That sword dance alone might have warranted giving you this chance."

Jionis ran a hand through his golden hair, his crimson eyes flashing, and laughed as innocently as a child. This attitude, the way he carried himself, his way of thinking—all these made it hard to believe that he was, in fact, a king. But he did indeed possess the most distinguished blood in the Dragonfriend Kingdom, that of the Lugunicas. As rulers, it could not be said that their house was particularly well regarded for its statecraft. But they had personalities that all found attractive, drawing people to them. Such was he…

"I did tell you to devise some solution that headquarters would go along with," Miklotov said from beside the king, looking for once both exasperated and shocked. "But I never imagined you would immediately resort to dragging His Majesty into this. I must admit, I'm surprised."

When Wilhelm had combined Miklotov's warning with Olfe's advice, he had hit upon the idea of a great battle that would allow Theresia to be free of her title of Sword Saint. He had talked Jionis into the idea, and it was the king who had brought this convocation of warriors together to hold a trial by combat.

"Now, Trias, show me. Show me that you alone can defeat all of my

kingdom's most able warriors. If you can do that, it will demonstrate that you are even greater than the Sword Saint, that you can single-handedly overcome the entire strength of this kingdom. Prove with your blade that we need no Sword Saint!"

The conclusion Wilhelm had found was the height of absurdity. It was a solution one could only reach by following the path of the sword as far as it could possibly go. But the king, who was the only one who had received Wilhelm's supplication on his balcony, who had seen firsthand the meeting between the Sword Saint and the Sword Devil at the ceremony, had merely laughed and told Wilhelm to leave things to him.

And now, all the most powerful fighters in the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica, who had originally assembled to celebrate the end of the civil war, were gathered for battle.

Wilhelm would defeat them all and replace need for the Sword Saint with the power of the Sword Devil. He would eliminate every last excuse for Theresia to be the Sword Saint. He would cut them down with his blade. All in order to prove that she could afford to be just another normal girl, smiling and enjoying her flowers.

"Take this, Trias!"

So shouting, Jionis tossed down a sword Miklotov had handed him. Wilhelm grabbed it as it spun through the air, pointing the tip of this sacred blade at the soldiers opposing him.

The sword was sharp, edge sparkling, and the sensation of imminent combat filled the training ground. The battlefield took shape.

"Now let the proceedings begin. With my own eyes, I shall bear witness to the love song of the Sword Devil."

The king made his declaration from the observation seat.

Almost instantaneously, Wilhelm jumped, advancing. He closed on his enemies, ready to cut them all down.

Bordeaux and the others rushed forward to meet him, sparking a battle with no quarter asked or given.

"Rrruuuuahhhhh!!"

Wilhelm howled like an animal, and then his blade cleaved through the crowd.

It wasn't as if she had planned all along to break her promise.

Theresia had done a good deal of thinking in her own way. Wilhelm was on her mind. He was often at the center of her thoughts. In fact, the more she thought about him, the more she loved him.

And the more intense those feelings got, the more concerned and even frightened she grew about what he might be doing at that castle where she couldn't see him.

Perhaps he might leave her again. That fear constantly tormented Theresia.

"I'm sure he's at the castle like he said…I think."

Between their conversation the night before and their parting that morning, she was convinced. It would be much more surprising not to find him at the castle.

So maybe she could go to the castle now, just to check.

"But that's exactly what he said not to do… Oh, but I'm so worried!"

She was already changed; now she needed only to decide whether or not to go out the door. She couldn't bring herself to cross that line, however, and so she hadn't left yet.

She had spent almost the last hour fretting about this. If she wasn't careful, she could find herself wasting the entire day worrying, right up until Wilhelm came home…

"And thaaat would be less than romaaantic, wouldn't it?"

"Wha?"

Theresia looked up, startled. Notwithstanding the fact that she had been deep in very concerned thought, it was rare for her to meet someone who could get close without her noticing.

Even more striking than that, though, was that Theresia recognized the voice.

She had heard it several days earlier, on the morning of the ceremony that had turned into her reunion with Wilhelm.

"Weeell, it's been a few days. How haaave you been, I wonder?"

Leaning against the open doorframe and smiling was a woman with indigo hair. Each of her eyes was a different color, and she had an uncanny beauty with which Theresia was all too familiar.

At that moment, too, one of the seeds of worry in Theresia's heart burst into full bloom.

“Are you…Miss Roswaal, then?”

“Goodness, I don’t thiiink I ever told you my name. And I doubt he’s filled you in on the details—what gave me away?”

“I just…thought it might be you. A woman’s intuition.”

“Well, well.”

The woman—Roswaal—wetted her thin lips with her tongue. Then she closed one eye; Theresia straightened up under the gaze of the still-open, golden one.

“Ahem. May I ask what business you have at my house? If you’re looking for Wilhelm, he isn’t here.”

“No need to get so riled up. He shot me down a long, long time ago. He’s completely infatuated with you. That, you need never doubt.”

“I w-wasn’t doubting it. I’m confident that I’m loved.” Theresia answered proudly, but her face darkened as she realized she may have misspoken. Roswaal said Wilhelm had shot her down. Might it not, then, be insensitive to boast of her own relationship with the man?

“Oh, you needn’t look so concerned. Those feelings are precious, and I hope you’ll aaaalways hold on to them. They may be the key to something important one day.”

“…What did you come here to say? If you’re simply here to congratulate me, I’d be happy to set out some tea and snacks.”

“You know full well that isn’t why I’m here. I… Weeeell, let’s say I’m here to butt in for the last time.”

Then Roswaal shrugged and laughed like a court jester.

“___”

Theresia, however, spotted in her smile something lonely and fleeting. Although even she didn’t know quite what it was.

13

The training ground was ablaze with combat, the immense friction of clashing weapons scorching the air.

“—!”

Wilhelm, sliding between blows like a gust of wind, lashed out at his enemies, rendering the elites unable to fight one by one.

In all, there were forty elite soldiers arranged against the lone Sword

Devil. Not a single of their number was known as anything less than a beast in combat, but when Wilhelm faced them, he felt his blood roil as an animalistic howl welled up from within him.

In a certain sense, this test was absurd. But Wilhelm had to prove his point. This was his way of convincing the kingdom, through his indomitable fighting ability, to surrender an immense power.

"Raaaughhh!!"

He flinched, barely managing to dodge a spear blow and retaliating with his sword. He kicked at a body that bent backward under the force of his strike, using the momentum to leap away; he allowed himself an instant to fill his lungs with air. The oxygen coursed through his blood, carrying energy throughout his body and reviving his limbs. He could still fight. He could keep going. It would not be long now before he would put on a fight that would make everyone forget about the Sword Saint.

"Learn to defend, dumbass!" his former commander ordered him.

"____"

Wilhelm was practically crawling on the ground as Bordeaux took aim at him with a sweep of his ax. Wilhelm could feel it slice through the air as he spun along with the weapon.

He felt a shock of pain as it grazed him. But the same moment offered him an opening. Bordeaux's great swing left his body exposed, and Wilhelm drove his sword directly at him. But—

"Damn you, Grimm!"

A huge shield inserted itself between them, repelling his blow, and Wilhelm cursed his old comrade's defense.

The other combatants were resisting Wilhelm with all their might, for this was what he had wished for. They couldn't hold back, precisely because they knew Theresia's heart and understood how Wilhelm felt. That was what had brought them together here in this display of resolution.

"____"

Thoughts ran like electricity; hands and feet moved in deeply familiar patterns. In the space of a blink, Wilhelm's sword lashed out at Grimm three times. Two of them Grimm intercepted with his shield, but he was too late for the third, and with a grunt he sank to the ground.

One more. Just one more.

"____"

Wilhelm's attention shifted away from the collapsed Grimm as he adjusted his grip on his sword and faced down Bordeaux.

Out of forty handpicked fighters, only the Mad Dog, Bordeaux Zergev, was left.

"Trias…!"

Carol held her arm and gritted her teeth as she watched this final showdown. Her long sword was broken, and Wilhelm was no longer so much as looking at her. Around her was a crowd of other warriors who had been similarly bested, all of them waiting anxiously for the denouement.

They had all been defeated by the Sword Devil: by his fearsome skills, his swordsmanship, and the fury of his passion.

She hated it. From the bottom of her heart, it pained her.

Or…it should have. Yet, Carol realized that what she felt was relief and even joy.

"So it is you, after all…"

The one who could make Theresia smile. The one who could grant her wish.

The one who could be stronger for Theresia than anyone else—was Wilhelm alone.

Though it was hard for her to admit, it made her impossibly happy, and that was a source of pain as well.

"Here we go, Wilhelm."

"I'm coming for you, Bordeaux."

The preliminary exchange was brief, the trading of thrusts and parries briefer; in less than an instant later, it was over.

With an earsplitting shout, Bordeaux stepped in, swinging his ax overhead before bringing it down. The blow was hard enough to split the earth, but the Sword Devil dodged it and stopped Bordeaux from moving further.

With no way to counterattack, Bordeaux laughed uproariously. There was a silver flash.

The sound of the impact echoed around the training field, the giant flung back easily by the blow.

He flew through the air, throwing up dust as he crashed to the ground.

When he finally stopped tumbling, his limbs akimbo, he put his palm to his face. And then—

"Ahhh, dammit! I can't believe I lost! I lost to a dumbass! Ahh, of all the…!"

The very last of the warriors gathered at the castle conceded his defeat to the Sword Devil.

The Sword Devil, who had magnificently demonstrated his ability with the blade.

14

Wilhelm looked over the fallen fighters: Grimm kneeling immobile, Bordeaux spread out and laughing madly, Carol frowning intensely. Then at last, he let out a long sigh.

His ragged breath tasted like blood in his mouth, and although he was sure no one had landed a solid hit on him, his whole body ached. The burden of this battle had gone beyond the usual; the Sword Devil had given his all for this fight. Now he looked to the observer's seat.

He raised his sword as if offering this victory to Jionis.

"Mm! Stunning, Trias! Your sword work and your passion alike are certainly… Hmm?"

As Jionis observed the scene before him, seemingly all but out of words, his face twisted. Wilhelm frowned at this and followed the king's gaze behind him.

There, he found someone he did not expect, someone who should not have been there. Wilhelm looked at the newcomer in wonderment, then groaned aloud.

"What…? What have you been doing, Wilhelm?"

At the entryway to the training ground stood a girl with red hair—Theresia van Astrea. Her sky-blue eyes took in the carnage before her; the sight of the toppled warriors seemed to trouble her. She didn't know what had happened, but it was obvious that it had been something far from ordinary.

"Astrea, presently the Sword Saint. That man there came directly to me requesting that you be released from the royal military. He said that he would use his blade to take away the place of the Sword Saint."

“Your Majesty Jionis…! Wilhelm, is that true?”

Jionis had explained the situation in lieu of the speechless Wilhelm. Theresia was surprised to see the king there, but her attention soon returned to Wilhelm.

He had wanted this to remain secret so that she wouldn’t feel burdened by it. But here they were.

“Yeah. It’s true.” Wilhelm nodded.

“So that’s why everyone here is— Even Carol!” Theresia said when she spotted her attendant among the fighters.

Carol hung her head as if she had been caught doing something wrong. The others, too, watched the conversation between the Sword Saint and the Sword Devil uncomfortably, from as much distance as they could manage.

Wilhelm, unable to predict what Theresia would do next, didn’t move a muscle.

Would she be angry? Try to hit him? At the very least, he didn’t expect her to be overjoyed. He knew her too well think she would be happy that this was all being handled without her.

Anger, then, he figured. But his prediction was only half-right. Theresia was angry. But…

“Your Majesty, why did you ever permit something so ridiculous?” Theresia demanded, her hands on her hips.

“What?”

The object of her anger was not Wilhelm, who had taken these actions without consulting her, nor with Carol, who had abetted him, but with Jionis, seated in the observer’s position.

Her question could well have been construed as lèse-majesté, but so far from being upset, Jionis returned a wan smile at Theresia’s threatening look and ran a hand through his golden hair.

“Well, er, I assure you, I thought it was silly myself. But that husband of yours was so serious about it, I found I couldn’t quite tell him no…”

“Y-Your Majesty! He’s not my husband yet! The way you— Really, I— Argh!”

“Theresia…?” Wilhelm broke into the bizarre conversation, calling to the red-faced woman.

“Uh! Yes!” she responded in a pinched tone, almost falling over herself as she turned around. Her face had achieved an entirely new level of redness.

“Y-you don’t understand. This is partly my fault for not properly communicating His Majesty’s honorable decision, but His Majesty is partly to blame, too…”

“Start from the beginning. Slowly.”

“Um, er, you see? Wilhelm, I’m, er, I’m elated that you wanted to free me from being the Sword Saint. I am. But…that problem was already figured out.” Theresia linked her fingers together as she dropped this bombshell.

Wilhelm looked at her in complete bewilderment, and all present who weren’t aware of the state of affairs similarly raised sounds of surprise, if they weren’t too stunned to say anything at all.

Theresia smiled at all of them. Wilhelm, still speechless, came up to her.

“Er, uh, um, W-Wilhelm…dear?”

“Details.”

“…The truth is, it came up when I spoke to His Majesty after the ceremony. H-he heard what you and I said to each other, and so…”

“The civil war was over,” Jionis broke in. “The Sword Saint had more than done her part for this nation. So how could we do something so base as to pull apart a man and woman in love?” The king nodded repeatedly. Wilhelm noticed that the only person who didn’t look remotely surprised was Miklotov, standing behind Jionis. He was almost certainly the only other person who had known all along.

To Wilhelm’s glare of protest, Miklotov offered only a look of innocence. “I did tell you,” the slim man said, “to be sure to have a few conversations.”

Hearing that, Wilhelm truly felt the strength drain out of him, crushed by the sense that he had brought all this on himself.

“Oh, Wil— Eek!” Theresia moved to support Wilhelm as he slumped down but found herself falling with him, down into his chest, until the two of them were both sitting on the ground. Theresia was dazed to feel great, strong arms around her.

“Urgh, you stink again… Wilhelm, you always smell this way.”

“And you always smell like flowers. I even noticed it during the ceremony.”

“I’ve always been your flower girl.” Theresia smiled sweetly and cuddled deeper into Wilhelm’s arms. It briefly crossed his mind to simply hold her like this forever.

“Ahh, young love is a sight to behold, but you’re not forgetting something,

are you, Astrea?"

"Er, uh n-no, sire! I mean, what, sire?" Theresia suddenly remembered they had an audience and jumped to her feet. She tried to make herself as presentable as possible, but Jionis simply smiled and waved his hand.

"The condition I set for your release from the role of Sword Saint. Do you recall?"

"Oh, er…" Theresia sounded as if the king had hit a particularly vulnerable spot.

Wilhelm, following Theresia's example, climbed slowly to his feet.

"What is it?" he asked. "What impossible task did he set you?"

"Er, well, it's…"

"If it's too hard for you, I'll do it. You can trust me with that much."

"Really?! Oh, but wait. One person can't do it—we need two."

Theresia was rather inarticulate, blushing as she sputtered a series of *er*s and *um*s. The entire scene startled those around her as they witnessed a side of the Sword Saint none of them had seen before. It was understandable, since they had only ever thought of her as an indefatigable fighter. Wilhelm himself felt a certain annoyance at sharing this dear side of Theresia with the rest of the world.

Hence, he finally grabbed her by the shoulders. "Out with it! What is it!"

"—! H-His Majesty said that as long as I'm sure to become your wife, I can quit being the Sword Saint!" Theresia finally exclaimed, blushing and almost tearful.

"____"

Wilhelm stood speechless as what she had said reached his eardrums, then made it to his brain, and finally worked its way into his understanding.

Theresia watched him with anxious eyes.

"What does that…?"

"I believe His Majesty's thinking is this," Miklotov said from beside the observer's place. "It would be perfectly awful to force a woman who's going to be a good wife and mother to wield a sword she doesn't want."

Wilhelm finally let out a breath. Theresia shook her head. "I kept meaning to tell you at the house, but…there just wasn't a chance."

"Because we were arguing. But even so, I can't believe…"

It never would have occurred to him that Theresia might be released from military service on the condition that she get married.

The Lugunican royal family was renowned for being a bit soft on their people, but Wilhelm had never realized just how soft.

"Ahem! A fine solution, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Profoundly wise."

Wilhelm glared at the self-satisfied king and the fawning prime minister's assistant, then turned to Theresia. Her eyes were damp, and she didn't speak a word as she waited to hear what he would say.

She was afraid he might refuse her or push her away. How silly.

"Wilhelm Astrea," he murmured.

"Huh…?" Theresia was taken aback.

"The Trias house is gone. Astrea will be my new family name, won't it?" The smile on his face was thin as passing mist. But it was enough to make Theresia's wide eyes even wider.

"So you're…saying yes?"

"What, you thought I would say no? What's wrong with you?"

"I mean! It's so sudden to talk about marriage, and…!"

"There is no one besides you. A bit later or a little sooner, it doesn't matter."

Theresia's mouth hung open at this blunt response, and a moment after, huge tears cascaded down her cheeks. Startled, Wilhelm drew Theresia into his chest, wet face and all.

"So you'll…you'll make me your bride?"

"Flower girl, bride—it's hardly any different. Don't worry so much, dummy."

"That's…kind of a stretch." Theresia laughed, her red eyes and nose and forehead still pressed into him.

Wilhelm, though, was surprised to realize as he looked at her that it didn't seem like such a stretch at all. She had owned him from the moment he had first met her. He couldn't even picture taking anyone else in marriage.

"…Wilhelm *van* Astrea."

"What?"

Still cradled in his arms, Theresia smiled just for him. "Your new name would be Wilhelm van Astrea. The name *van* was given to the lineage of Sword Saints by the person who first established it… And you are the one who took my sword from me."

Wilhelm van Astrea.

He snorted quietly.

"That's not bad."

I mean, having the same surname as you.

He didn't say that last part out loud. Instead, the Sword Devil welcomed the woman who was no longer the Sword Saint as his wife; held her to himself with all his love, tenderly stroking her shimmering red hair.

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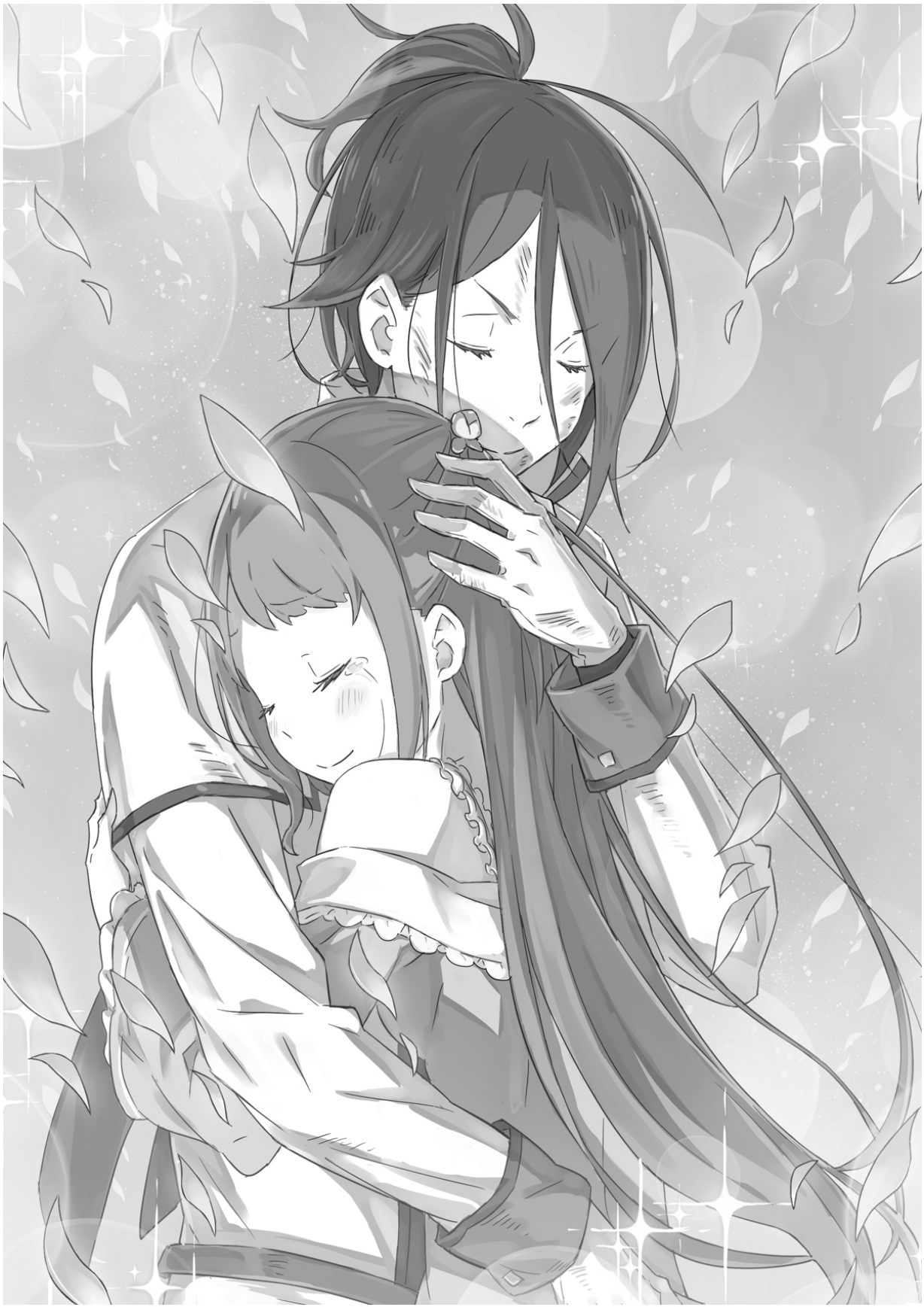


THE LOVE BALLAD OF THE SWORD DEVIL

The Wedding Day

1

A pleasant, warm wind welcomed Wilhelm the moment he set foot in the garden. The breeze offered him the sweet, nose-tickling scent of the flowers, along with a panoply of leaves, before it was swept up into the clear sky.

The garden, reflecting the propensities of its owner, was abloom with seasonal flowers. There were large and small buds of every kind, all of them are arranged in their own designated places to beautiful effect.

As he stood looking at all the gorgeous flowers, he had a thought. The garden's owner, presently standing in the center of the space enjoying the scenery, was more flowerlike than any of the actual blossoms.

"Theresia." Wilhelm put a stop to his ruminations and instead called out to the woman.

She turned, holding her red hair against the wind. Her blue eyes met Wilhelm's, and a smile so dear to him crept across her lips, blinding him to any other flowers in the place.

"Wilhelm."

The sound of his name brought the enraptured young man back to his senses. He raised a hand as if to cover his momentary reverie. "Yeah," he said brusquely. "I just returned."

"Welcome back." His curt greeting only made her regard him with even more fondness. These few words they shared were enough to fill Wilhelm's heart with warmth. He wanted to simply lose himself in this feeling. If only he could…

"So were you able to understand the whole story?" she asked. She continued smiling, but her words scattered his wish like so much gossamer.

"____"

"Wilhelm?"

Her question had caused his face to tighten, a change not lost on Theresia. The way she then said his name left him with a suspicion he couldn't quite shake. At some point, her smile disappeared, too. Wilhelm sighed, feeling her gaze like a piercing sword.

"…It might be useless, but there's something I want to say first."

"…It might be useless, but I'll listen to what you have to say first."

"Don't get mad."

"I think that depends on what you're going to say, doesn't it?"

With his defensive gambit thwarted, there was a moment of silence between the two of them. But it wasn't like Wilhelm to delay the inevitable. He steeled himself and opened his mouth.

"I dragged the brass into coming and talking to me directly. I told them this was tyranny."

"Uh-huh. Complete injustice. And?"

"They decided to double my patrol assignment. I'm sorry."

"Why on earth would they do that?!"

Theresia's mouth hung open; she grabbed Wilhelm by the lapels and shook him violently. Her thin arms nonetheless managed to push him around quite capably.

"I told you not to get mad," Wilhelm said irritably.

"*Of course* I'm going to get mad! I mean…! After all—"

Theresia couldn't finish her sentence but gave him a shove in the chest. Then her sky-blue eyes filled with tears, and she shouted,

"Our wedding is in three days!!"

Theresia's yelling startled the birds that had been placidly viewing the garden. Beneath the sound of dozens of wings stood a man and a woman looking at each other—two people who had come together after much strife and now found themselves amid new troubles—the Sword Saint and the Sword Devil, husband- and wife-to-be.

2

—There once was a long, long war, one that history records as the Demi-

human War.

It was a civil conflict that tore apart the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica for nine years, and it was brought to an end by a single young woman, the Sword Saint.

In respect of her achievements, the kingdom hailed her as a hero, but the dedication and swordsmanship of a young man called the Sword Devil put a stop to this.

Through many a twist and turn, the Sword Saint eventually became nothing more than a normal girl, was wed to the Sword Devil, and they lived happily ever after. And everyone gave their blessing to them…

—*Ahem.* The world is not so kind a place as to let a story conclude so neatly.

On the one hand, there was the Sword Saint, born to a long line of Sword Saints, who wielded her blade on behalf of the kingdom.

On the other, there was the Sword Devil, from a house destroyed during the war, who abandoned his unit when the fighting was fiercest, and who ultimately wrecked the ceremony celebrating the armistice.

Wilhelm's past as someone who had abandoned knighthood and commendations, throwing away his honors, put him in a difficult position; it presented a variety of hurdles to their marriage. But the bond between them, along with the help of those around them, enabled them to overcome these challenges. And now the wedding was fast approaching, a day when the whole nation would at long last celebrate the joining of Wilhelm and Theresia as husband and wife.

"And now? Now they say the groom is going to miss the wedding!"

Theresia, red faced, stomped on the carpeted floor of the apartments, her anger from the garden in no way diminished. Wilhelm tried to ignore her, letting out a vexed sigh.

"Oh! Oh! That sigh—you think I'm just a lot of trouble! This concerns us both, so use your head, Wilhelm! This is awful; do you understand?!"

"Look at you, crowing over one sigh… And I don't think you're trouble. Only that you're noisy."

"There! That right there is proof that you're not taking this seriously! Oh, I can't believe you!"

Wilhelm threw up his hands, seeing that nothing he said was likely to do anything but make things worse for him. At the moment, Theresia was like an

adorable bomb; one careless touch could set off an explosion.

"You finally got your knighthood back, and all the naysayers were finally coming around, too. Why would deployment orders come down to Zergev Squadron right before our wedding ceremony? There's a whole army of other units who could handle a job like this!" After the first eruption had run its course, Theresia finally returned to the question at hand.

Wilhelm crossed his arms, glad to return to the actual problem, and said, "I told you. There aren't a lot of units at the castle right now that are available for deployment. Squadrons from the army have been sent all over the country in the name of rebuilding after the war. We might be the only ones free at the moment who can tackle a mission like this…so the baton's passed to us."

"That can't be anything but an excuse! I'm sure somebody's done this simply to make your life difficult… In fact, I'm sure it's my father!"

"I'd like to say you're being paranoid, but…"

"See? Even you think so!" Theresia smacked her hands together and puffed out her cheeks angrily.

Theresia's father, Veltol Astrea, was the current head of the Astrea family and would soon be Wilhelm's father-in-law. Wilhelm had of course gone to see to his fiancée's parents before the wedding, and the tension of that interview was difficult to forget. Veltol had attempted to uncover Wilhelm's true character and reveal any fault with an immense number of vehement questions; Veltol was not a bad person, but he was naturally protective of Theresia.

So protective, in fact, that the suggestion that this latest assignment was a ploy of his to interfere with the wedding was all too plausible.

"I guess that would mean he used the generations' worth of weight that belongs to the Astrea name to influence the country's military leaders…" Wilhelm mused. But at the same time, he wondered whether the man would actually be that desperate to scuttle his daughter's wedding.

Theresia, however, looked at the ground, her long lashes covering her eyes. "My older brothers, Thames and Carlan, and my younger brother, Cajiress… All my siblings died in the war. I'm all my father has left. I'm sure he's just worried."

"____"

"Still, he's got a lot of nerve interfering with his daughter's happiness!

We have to fight him!"

"We did fight him, and the result was even more patrol duty than before. They're not playing fair."

"S-so you were willing to win my hand through combat, but you can't bring yourself to face my father?"

She reddened at her own use of the word *win*, but nonetheless Theresia looked tauntingly at Wilhelm. The Sword Devil frowned.

"Getting serious in order to win you over and doing it to shut up your dad are two different things. Believe me, I wish it were as easy as just chopping him up…"

"My father is about average with the sword…or even a little less, in my opinion. My uncle…my father's younger brother, was the Sword Saint before me, and my father was quick to give up on the path of the blade…"

"In other words, beating him in a sword fight wouldn't carry much meaning. Plus—"

There, he stopped, as he imagined what really lay behind what was most likely Veltol's strategy.

Wilhelm had lost his family and the war, abandoned the military, and had even thrown away his status as a knight. He hardly expected the House of Astrea to welcome him with open arms. Truth be told, he hadn't made the best impression when he met her family, either, and the permission for this marriage had been largely formal. If Wilhelm had to guess, he would say Veltol was testing him, to see if Wilhelm was worthy of his daughter.

It was difficult to swallow losing all his time off immediately before the wedding, and then being made to work even more when he brought it up.

"But when you go looking for a showdown, you can't back off when you find one."

"A showdown?"

"If this really is your dad's doing, then what it is, is a challenge. It ticks me off that it isn't a sword battle, but everyone has their own way of fighting. I'll simply have to live with it."

They would engage in combat, not with the blade but in their commitment to Theresia. The challenge seemed to be: *If you want to win Theresia, surely you can at least handle this.*

And if such a paltry test was all it took to prove his worth, Wilhelm was perfectly happy to meet it.

“I won you from the Sword God. You better believe I can win you from your father.”

“Oh, er… Well, uh…”

Hearing this so directly caused Theresia to forget all her anger as she surrendered herself to embarrassment. She looked shyly at the ground but eventually found her voice again. “…Can I trust that in three days, you’ll make me your bride?”

“Take all that energy you spend worrying about me and use it to get yourself ready. And by the way, don’t let anyone but me see that vulnerable, blushing face of yours.”

“Vulnerable?” She looked shocked; maybe she had never realized this about herself.

“___”

Wilhelm frowned at how incredibly charming her expression was. He hid his reaction with a playful push of the girl’s forehead.

“Eeep!”

The Sword Saint, who in three days would be the bride of the Sword Devil, gave a cute little yelp.

3

Zergev Squadron had an unparalleled record during the Demi-human War, as did its leader, the Mad Dog, Bordeaux Zergev.

Bordeaux, who had faced down a lifetime’s worth of battles, had been Wilhelm’s superior for a very long time, and Wilhelm owed him a great deal. Not that either of them had ever admitted as much aloud.

The nation’s army, including Zergev Squadron, was currently undergoing a major reorganization after the conclusion of the war, and as part of this, Bordeaux had been promoted from captain to join the brass at headquarters. As such, the captaincy of Zergev Squadron was vacant, and the tradition was to promote from within.

“…And someone out there must have a screw loose, because they want *me* to be captain.” Wilhelm grimaced. He was standing in the square just in front of the Lugunica Castle gates, at the very center of the royal capital, in front of more than a hundred squadron members assembled there.

Tradition is tradition, Grimm informed him. *Nothing you can do.*

"There's something wrong with a tradition like that. How does a guy who abandoned the squadron get promoted to lead? It'll look bad if we don't pick our leaders fair and square."

The man who crashed a royal ceremony and sword-fought the Sword Saint into being his wife is concerned about looking bad?

"Aw, shaddup. Or…stop writing, or *something*."

The object of this scalding, teeth-sucking rebuke from Wilhelm was his hurriedly speaking—or rather, hurriedly scrawling—old war buddy Grimm Fauzen, now in the unaccustomed garb of the squadron's second-in-command.

He had known Wilhelm almost since the beginning of the civil war, and although he could no longer speak, the two of them continued to communicate on a nearly telepathic level. As captain and vice-captain, they were going to be fine, and that irritated Wilhelm.

The fact that Grimm seemed to be enjoying Wilhelm's discomfort at the situation bothered him, too.

"I think Vice-Captain Grimm hit the nail on the head. At least, no one around here seems to be upset about you being captain. That ceremony proved your strength—and your balls."

"Careful I don't give you a personal demonstration, Conwood."

"Oooh, I'm shaking!"

The banter came from a long-standing member of Zergev Squadron, Conwood Melahau. He wasn't particularly distinguished in combat, but even Wilhelm had noticed his conduct. A quick wit served one both on and off the battlefield.

There were many who, like Conwood, had known Wilhelm as part of Zergev Squadron from two years ago or more. Captain he may have been, but Wilhelm found himself commanding a minimum of authority among so many who had known him for so long. All the worse if they had seen him at his youngest and most unpolished.

"A captain we know, a vice-captain we know… Some reorg."

The reborn Zergev Squadron consisted of many veteran members, including Vice-Captain Grimm and Captain Wilhelm. Though Bordeaux was no longer with them, his name would remain.

It's so that the names of all the people we fought with live on, right?

"I can practically hear Pivot sighing… Putting them to work even after

they're dead."

Grimm smiled ironically, but Wilhelm ignored him and looked at the assembled troops.

Zergev Squadron was going to sortie from the capital to patrol nearby towns and villages. Their objective was to restore the public safety that had disappeared during the conflict and to put an end to any plotters who might be looking to upset the armistice. It was a breeze compared to anything they had done during the war, yet the soldiers of Zergev Squadron stood with tense faces, eyes ablaze with true passion.

"Even if everything goes according to plan, this patrol will take almost exactly three days… We'll have to come back right on the captain and Lady Theresia's wedding day. You know what? When I heard these orders, I thought brass had gone insane."

"The key to this mission will be how much time we waste on Liphus Highway. Everyone, make sure you stay inside the wind repel blessing."

"Hate to say it, but if your land dragon collapses on the way, you're gonna get left behind. We can't have anyone slowing us down on this trip. I think everyone here agrees that's the right thing to do."

"Yeah, for sure. If anything happens to me, don't you dare rescue me…!"

Listening to the soldiers confer among themselves as they discussed their plans in detail, Wilhelm arched an eyebrow. Why were they so intent on this? It was a fact that he had to be back in time for the wedding, but that was nothing more than a personal problem of his own. Ultimately, it had no impact on the rest of them…

"Just shows how concerned they all are about this," a familiar, hoarse voice said. Wilhelm turned toward the voice and saw a craggy-faced giant approaching from the direction of the castle. The man was well built, sporting close-cropped blue hair: Bordeaux Zergev.

"It's high time you learned to pay attention to what's going on around you. You're the leader of a squadron now, and you're going to be a husband soon. Can't get away with only thinking about yourself, if you want to be good at either." He barked a laugh.

Wilhelm merely shrugged. "What are you doing here so suddenly? I thought you were too busy for all this."

"Gah-ha-ha. I'm busy all right. But this is the first mission of the new Zergev Squadron. As its former commander, the least I can do is see it off."

With a stout, hardy laugh, Bordeaux gave Wilhelm a pat on the shoulder that felt more like a punch. The Sword Devil wobbled from the impact, and the giant said, more quietly, "Besides, the enlisted men aren't the only ones who think this assignment is an abuse of authority. There's no way the higher-ups don't know when the Sword Saint and the Sword Devil are getting married. This smells like trouble, and you'd better watch out."

"I'm still not used to you giving me advice like that."

"Status is as status does. I'm learning to use my head, believe it or not… And that talker you recommended to me the other day is surprisingly helpful. It was the right call, bugging them to let him out of jail."

"Oh, Olfe. He's a philanderer and a con man, but that doesn't mean he can't be useful."

Bordeaux was talking about the fraudster whose acquaintance Wilhelm had made in the Prison Tower, the one who had advised him about how to resolve his Theresia problem. Wilhelm, making good on his promise to intercede on Olfe's behalf, had recommended him to Bordeaux as a potential helper. Against all expectations, it seemed Olfe was indeed proving worthwhile.

"It helps to have a sharp guy like him around. I think it might be a good idea someday to set up an organization that works the way he does. And when we do, I'll call it Six-Tongue, in his honor."

"He's so proud of how many tongues he has," Wilhelm said. "Did he find anything out for you?"

"No details. Just that this is probably interference by certain parties who don't think much of you and Lady Theresia getting married. Any guesses?"

"…One certain enough to make my head hurt."

He could hardly come out and say that the bride's father was the culprit, but his suspicions had deepened into near certainty.

Bordeaux frowned at his response, but Wilhelm shook his head and said, "Don't sweat it. They want a fight? Well, so do I. You've got nothing to worry about."

"You think this is about winning and losing? I'm not sure myself, but all right."

Bordeaux's refusal to get caught up in niggling details was both one of his weapons and one of his strongest features. He concluded their conversation with a gruff "Give 'em hell," then went to encourage the men.

He's a real captain. Grimm smiled.

"A real former captain, but I agree." Wilhelm looked toward the castle gate. "Sheesh. When Bordeaux's had his fun, we'll set out."

There were more than a hundred people in the squadron all told, along with nearly twenty dragon carriages to carry them. Everything was lined up and ready to go, and the soldiers were restless. Wilhelm intended to get moving as soon as Bordeaux was done making the rounds. But even as the thought was crossing his mind…

"Wilhelm!"

…he heard his name from the direction of the gate and looked over. He saw a young woman running down the slope in little mincing steps, breathing quickly.

"Theresia? Why are you here?"

"Thank goodness! I'm so glad I got here before you left."

All but ignoring the shocked Wilhelm, Theresia bowed politely to the guard at the gate and entered the plaza. The castle gate, that most crucial of defenses, had been breached without so much as a shout.

"…I know everyone recognizes you and all," Wilhelm said, "but when has a guard ever let a 'retired' girl into the castle so easily?"

"The guards all know exactly who I am. I think I may even know them better than you do—hah!" Theresia winked at Wilhelm, who regarded her dubiously.

They had already said their good-byes when he left the mansion. He had sworn to be back before their wedding in three days' time, then departed quickly so he wouldn't be tempted to linger. And now it was all for naught.

Such partings became harder the longer you spent on them. Maybe he still didn't realize just how much this woman thought of him.

"Come on, Wilhelm. You're scowling again. I told you to stop that."

"Well, it's your fault."

"How is it my fault? I can't believe you would say that. Oh, oh! But listen…"

Theresia held out something she had been hiding behind her back. Wilhelm, still frowning, took it: It was a box wrapped in bright yellow cloth.

"What's this?"

"I made it for you, since you're going so far away. Y-y-you know what they call…a lunch packed with love?"

“You’re so embarrassed you can barely bring yourself to say it,” Wilhelm remarked, testing the weight of the package in his hands. Theresia had turned red halfway through her explanation. It seemed too heavy to be something she had concocted on such short notice, and Wilhelm was privately pleased. Partly to have something to eat, of course, but also because Theresia had cared enough to make this.

“So, uh, don’t you, er, have anything to say?” Theresia said.

“What would I say?”

“For crying out loud! I went out of my way to make a nice lunch for you, didn’t I? How about some heartfelt thanks or something?”

“Heartfelt thanks, huh?” He paused thoughtfully. “I’ll pretend it’s you while I’m eating it.”

“Argh, I don’t know how to feel about that…!”

Wilhelm had considered his words carefully, but judging by Theresia’s reaction, they had been the wrong ones.

Regardless, it didn’t change the fact that he was happy. That much seemed to have gotten across to her, and Theresia managed a half smile at Wilhelm’s clumsy answer.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting much. It’s no big deal. If you can accept that meal in the same spirit I made it, that’s enough.”

“Great. So why the sudden impulse to make me a ‘lunch with love’?”

“I can’t believe you can say that so readily…!”

It wasn’t just Theresia’s expression that could change quickly but the whole color of her face. She went from red to pale to ghostly white; finally, she settled on a delicate cough.

“The army isn’t exactly known for serving gourmet food, right?” she said. “Plus, Zergev Squadron will be on the move, and it’s full of *men* besides. Call this my one tiny act of resistance in your defense.”

“We’ve got Grimm to handle our food. And even I can cook.”

“Surely you don’t expect Grimm alone to cook for a hundred soldiers. And as for the blackened meat and boiled-to-death vegetables *you* serve, I don’t even consider that food.”

“Hrk…”

“Anyway, I wanted to do something for you. If there was anything I could do to help you have even a little more energy to get back in time for our wedding…then I wanted to do it! That’s all.”

Realizing that she was starting to talk in circles, Theresia looked away partway through her speech. It meant she missed the change in Wilhelm's eyes.

"____"

She didn't notice the way he had to suppress his desire to embrace her that very moment, to lose himself in her vulnerable sweetness.

It was a close call. But he had to consider the place they were in, and station was station. This wasn't even about setting a bad example for his subordinates. A fetter that Wilhelm had never concerned himself with now stayed his hand. Had it saved him, or had it held him back? His feelings were complicated.

"I knew moving up the ranks wouldn't do me any favors…"

"Really? I'm happy that so many people are acknowledging you."

"Do you do these things on purpose?"

"__?"

Theresia stood there surprised, totally unaware of how adorable she was. Wilhelm's shoulders slumped. The Sword Devil belatedly realized that all eyes were on him. Bordeaux had finished firing up the troops, and the entire squadron was now watching the couple's exchange. They seemed to be genuinely enjoying the banter between the Sword Devil and the Sword Saint.

"…What are you all looking at?"

"Aw, nothin'." Conwood grinned. "Just thinking, I know it's hard to leave true love behind, but maybe it's about time to move out. You and your old lady can spend allll the time you want together when we're done here, *after* the wedding. For now, our captain's a bachelor."

"Old lady? Ugh… I think it's a little soon for that…!"

A chuckle ran through the rest of the squadron at Conwood's teasing. Wilhelm clucked his tongue at being the butt of the laughter, but Theresia, hands clapped to her reddening face, didn't look completely displeased.

Now she took a small breath and stepped out in front of Zergev Squadron. "Er, thank you for giving me a few minutes of your time before you set out. I somehow never quite thought the day would come when I would see you leaving without me this way. And maybe I should apologize for that, too."

"____"

Theresia looked embarrassed and guilty, but the squad remained silent. Until a scant three months ago, Theresia and Zergev Squadron had frequently

fought side by side in the civil war. She was the Sword Saint: She had accompanied them on expeditions, and with her blade had done more than anyone else on the front lines.

And now Zergev Squadron was going on patrol, and Theresia was staying behind in the capital. It would have been unthinkable during the war, and perhaps Theresia herself felt somewhat abandoned.

But—

"Eep!"

"Why apologize, dummy? This is the way things work."

Wilhelm gave her a smack on the back of the head, then stepped out in front of her. Before Theresia could protest while rubbing her head, the Sword Devil made an audible sound with the heel of his boot. In response, the soldiers of Zergev Squadron clacked their heels against the ground as well, straightening their ranks.

"Wow…"

"Fighting and defense are a soldier's duty," Wilhelm said. "I told you, Theresia. You stay here, behind me and the rest of the soldiers, and tend to your flowers or something. That's a civilian's duty."

"Having a housewife sounds pretty good, eh, Cap?" Conwood teased, to which Grimm added, *He's got you there!* and the entire squadron burst into laughter again.

Wilhelm, too, laughed begrudgingly, and Theresia watched him with wide eyes.

"___"

Just for a moment, those great blue eyes came dangerously close to tears. Theresia quickly brushed them away with her sleeve, forcing a smile to her face. A kind smile that could instantly captivate the hearts of even the Sword Devil, Wilhelm, and all his mighty men.

Still smiling, Theresia bowed her head deeply and said, "Thank you all. Everyone, please take care of Wilhelm for me while you're gone!"

Those were the last words anyone said before they moved out.

4

"Gah-ha-ha-ha! What a thing for our Wilhelm, Miss Theresia. There couldn't have been a better way to send him off. I can't believe he's so whipped

already."

"'Whipped'? Please. He's not the kind who can easily be confined or controlled. I sometimes wonder if I'm not the one who's got him in such a tight grip."

"A lack of self-awareness is a sin of its own. But either way, you've got your duty to fulfill as the Sword Devil's wife."

Such was the conversation that ensued when Zergev Squadron had left Theresia and Bordeaux behind at last. The two of them shared the kind of bond that is forged between people who have survived battle together. On the one hand, there was Bordeaux, who had been pulled from the front lines on account of his promotion; on the other, Theresia, who had effectively retired: Their respective positions also gave them much in common.

"Master Bordeaux, don't you feel lonely watching Wilhelm and the others go?"

"Lonely. What a sweet word. I admit there's a little twinge…or maybe a big twinge, not being able to just run off with them like I used to." Bordeaux looked down at his hands, which didn't hold the familiar battle-ax, and his voice dropped a bit. Soon, though, he formed two fists. "But look. The battlefield might change, but I'm still me. I have my responsibilities. There are people who have been expecting and hoping I'd move up in the world. I'm glad I can wish and hope for things. Just like you have your hopes for Wilhelm, Miss Theresia."

"I… Yes, I feel the same way." She looked out at where Wilhelm and his soldiers had gone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the burly arms cross. "By the way," Bordeaux said, "as for that thing you asked me to handle on this new battlefield…about whoever sent Zergev Squadron on this random mission…"

"I'm sorry to lean on you. It's just that right now, I can't think of anyone else I can count on."

"Don't sweat it. We're talking about a wedding between two of my oldest comrades. Ain't like I've got no dog in this fight… I'm just not completely sure if this is something I should tell you." Bordeaux scratched his short hair, looking pained. Theresia narrowed her eyes, unable to quell a bad feeling about whatever might be making him hesitate to speak.

"It's…all right. Please, speak freely. Don't cushion it."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Don't spare me."

"…It looks like the one behind these orders is the House of Astrea. In other words, your father."

The pain was evident in Bordeaux's voice. Theresia closed her eyes.

The explosive aura that could suddenly be felt in the air was enough to make every hair on every guard at the gate stand on end. Even Bordeaux, with his long combat experience, found himself preparing for death.

But the Sword Saint, the source of this incredible presence, quickly got it under control. "I-I'm sorry! I lost my head! It was an accident! Don't worry!" Bowing to the startled guards, Theresia smacked her forehead with her palm as if to emphasize how repentant she was. It made a cute little *bonk*, and Bordeaux started laughing at the incongruity of the sound with this great sword fighter.

"Miss Theresia…I think you and Wilhelm both had an inkling, right?"

"Yes, well. I didn't want to believe it. Even now, I wish it weren't true."

Her suspicions had been confirmed. When she learned that it was in fact her own house, her very father who had tried to mess with her wedding, a storm began to rage within Theresia's heart and mind.

In any event, though, she now knew the identity of her foe. And if Wilhelm was going off to a decisive battle…

"Then I have to fight, too…"

"M-Miss Theresia? I'm sure I don't have to point out that if you pick up your sword, Wilhelm will be unhappy, right? Er, and I wouldn't be so thrilled, either."

"Oh, by 'fight,' I mean 'talk.' It was a figure of speech…an emotional thing."

Nonetheless, Theresia, feeling much different now, had clenched her fist. Bordeaux acknowledged all this with great unease.

Theresia had charged Bordeaux with investigating this case, never mentioning to Wilhelm that she had done so. She had every intention of settling things with her father herself. Bordeaux fervently hoped that there wouldn't be too much violence.

"If you need an intermediary, I wouldn't be opposed…" he said.

"It's all right," Theresia answered. "I know you're busy, Master Bordeaux, and I would hate to trouble you. Besides, this problem concerns me and Wilhelm, and I want to settle it properly as husband and w-w-wife!

As husband and wife. Yes," she managed, her face red.

She bowed deeply to Bordeaux, who couldn't quite shake his concern; then she darted away from the plaza.

It was clear even as she walked away: She was planning to find Veltol Astrea, her own father, and settle this matter.

"Nothing is ever easy with those two," Bordeaux muttered. Feeling as if he had aged noticeably, he headed back to the castle to work. He had only one prayer in his heart—that the wedding would go off without a hitch in three days' time.

5

The order for Zergev Squadron on this mission was to patrol the highways and byways around the capital. The military had already been deployed to the so-called five great cities of the nation to help rebuild and promote public safety after the war, so this patrol would mostly cover the smaller towns and villages on these roads.

It was not a mission the elite Zergev Squadron would normally be assigned. All the more reason to think that this particular assignment was a ploy by someone behind the scenes.

And you think it's Lady Theresia's father causing trouble? Don't you think you're being paranoid?

"You haven't met the man. If you had, you'd know I'm not kidding around here… Not that I don't understand why he'd be overprotective."

Wilhelm pursed his lips at Grimm's suggestion as the two of them rode side by side on the land dragons. His old brother in arms smiled, then wrote a reply on his paper.

With the wind repel blessing, there was no bumping or noise as they traveled along. Even so, Wilhelm was privately impressed that Grimm could write so readily while riding on the back of a dragon.

I'm used to it.

"…I didn't say anything." Wilhelm frowned, unhappy to have his thoughts read so easily. Grimm squinted at him, which caused Wilhelm to growl, "What? You don't look like you're paying attention. Don't come crying to me if you fall off your dragon."

I was just feeling a little emotional, what with your wedding in three

days. You've really grown up.

Grimm really did look deeply moved, enough to stop Wilhelm from wanting to snap at him further. The seven years they had known each other encompassed Wilhelm's entire time with the military. To say nothing of his "lost" two years. His acquaintance with Bordeaux and Zergev Squadron was just as long, and even Wilhelm was capable of occasionally experiencing a genuine emotion or two.

"…You wanna know the truth?" Wilhelm said. "I was sure you were going to die ten minutes after I met you."

I'm sure that's true. I myself never believed I'd survive the civil war. Even now I think there must've been some mistake, that I used up my life's supply of luck.

"Your life's supply, huh?"

Wilhelm was not fond of looking at life as being at the whim of luck, good or bad. Especially not when it came to the battlefield—a place of life and death, where men were forged in the flames of combat.

The only thing that influenced survival in combat was what you had done in your life up to that point. He believed it should be sword against sword, magic against magic, life against life. A younger Wilhelm might have laid into Grimm on this point. But now, he thought twice. Why? Because of a certain meeting.

Because he had met a woman who made him think he had used up his own life's supply of good luck.

Grimm offered a piece of paper to the silent Wilhelm, with just one sentence. *You've gone soft.*

"Screw off." Having been easily read once again, Wilhelm angrily shoved the paper away.

"___"

Satisfied with this response, Grimm focused on something new. He pulled a short metal stick from his saddle and beat it against a piece of metal attached to his thigh. The resulting clamor was his way of communicating with those around him. In response to the sound of metal on metal, Conwood came up alongside from behind them.

"You called?" he said.

I want to go over the patrol route again. Time is especially tight on this mission.

“That’s for damn sure.” Conwood gave a pointed nod, then looked at Wilhelm. Wilhelm maintained a blunt silence, evidence that even the Sword Devil could learn his lesson.

“We can’t have Lady Theresia standing at the altar all by her lonesome. Believe me, the whole squad is behind you on that. And that little scene before we left only made the troops even more eager.”

“That’s enough of that. Hurry up and get down to business.” Wilhelm gave Conwood a prickly stare. The other man pulled a map from his bag and opened it. It showed the area around the capital, with their route marked in red ink and circles around their destinations.

“First, we’ll go down Liphas to Furoul,” Conwood said. “Then we’ll head west, through Milgre, Bonobo, and Cramlin, before getting back to the capital. Forced march.”

“That’s two days just counting travel,” Wilhelm said. “Including patrolling, I’m not sure three days will be enough.”

“That’s why we’re going to fly down those roads as fast as we can—so three days will be enough. We’ve agreed to leave anyone who falls behind. The men are prepared to die rather than slow us down.”

“This isn’t an assignment to die for…”

Wilhelm might have taken Conwood’s words as a joke were it not for the man’s face and the conversations he’d overheard before they left. Regardless, it was true that they would be trying to keep travel time to the absolute minimum.

“I think if, in addition to that, we finish our patrols in each town as quickly as possible, we’ll make it,” Conwood said.

“Can we live with that?” Wilhelm asked. “The whole point is to improve public safety, right? If we go simply to say that we technically went, then why even bother?”

“Not a problem. The towns on our route are practically on top of the capital… They’re probably the safest smaller settlements in the country right now, if I say so myself. They just need to know that if there’s any trouble, the big, scary Sword Devil will rush right out to deal with it.”

It matters that people see us. That’s the point. Grimm nodded as if to emphasize that there was no reason to worry.

It somehow felt to Wilhelm like a very broad interpretation of their assignment, but if they were too diligent, they would certainly run out of time.

This was the compromise his men had reached in weighing time against duty.

"Is this another sign that I've gone soft…or that I've gotten too clever for my own good?"

This is another thing you have to do for Lady Theresia.

"You think that's a way to get me to agree to anything, don't you…?"

Grimm was right, though, that this logic quickly brought Wilhelm around.

"At this speed, and sticking to only what's strictly required for patrols, we should be back in the capital in two and a half days. With half a day's time, you should even have a few minutes to get ready for the ceremony. And then everyone lives happily ever after."

"I sure hope so…"

Conwood sounded even brighter than usual, maybe in an attempt to relieve the anxiety they felt. Wilhelm, however, found the whole thing difficult to swallow. He harbored a private worry he couldn't quite get rid of. Grateful as he was that the soldiers were so completely committed to getting him home in time for his wedding, he knew Veltol was behind this.

I don't think he's going to let me get away so easily, he thought.

This isn't like you. Are you really that worried?

"I'm fighting an enemy I can't reach with my sword. I might as well be swinging a stick."

Wilhelm's expression was dark, and Grimm held out some paper to him. *I understand. I hope you'll feel better. We should be able to pretty much just pass through our first stop, Furoul.*

Wilhelm's eyes widened as he read the scrap. "—? What, do you know something?"

Furoul is where I was born. I have a certain amount of sway with the residents. That should help us wrap up the patrol there in a short time.

Wilhelm raised an eyebrow. "Huh, that's news to me. I didn't realize you were from so close."

Grimm gave him a complicated smile. Wilhelm knew that expression. It was the look of a man who had been disloyal to his parents. It looked just like himself: a man who'd fled his home after a fight with his brothers, someone who had never had a chance to apologize.

"Everyone's got a history," Conwood deadpanned. "It's not like this is a foreign concept to us."

"Is this whole squadron made up of runaways? Some elite unit this is,"

Wilhelm said, touched by their generosity of spirit. His heart grew ever so slightly lighter; he had been blessed with excellent companions. Not that he would admit so aloud.

Thanks. Anyway, let me handle Furoul.

Just as Grimm was affirming that he would handle things, the faint outline of some buildings became visible down the road. It was Furoul, the inn town they had just been talking about. Their first stop and a test of just how good a talker Grimm was…

"Huh?"

Just as the thought was crossing his mind, Wilhelm was stunned speechless by what he saw of the town. So, too, was the rest of Zergev Squadron.

The reason was a gigantic banner hung over the entrance to the town reading, WELCOME! THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN OF THE GREAT HERO FROM OUR TOWN! The entire population appeared to be present to greet them.

A great cheer went up; the sound of people who recognized a prodigal son come back to them after having won for himself a position of authority in the national military. There was no question of whom these people were welcoming.

"…Hey," Wilhelm said to Grimm, "you really think you can convince them to keep this short?"

He was speaking on behalf of all of them; the entire squadron looked at Grimm at once. Grimm started to sweat. With a trembling hand, he scrawled out, *I'll try.*

It was a far cry from the bold claims he'd been making a few minutes earlier.

6

"Well, I'll be! To think the good-for-nothing spawn of the innkeeper would come back to us so high in the world!"

It's been a long time. I'm sorry. There are so many things to talk about, but…

"Grimm, you're something else! Me, I ran away from the army almost as soon as I joined and came back home…"

I don't blame you. The battlefield is a terrifying place.

“Saaay, Grimm. I know a sweet young lass you might like. Wanna talk to her before you go?”

I’m sorry! I’m already seeing someone…

And so it went, until Zergev Squadron was finally able to extricate itself from Furoul.

They had allotted two hours for their patrol in this town. By the good offices of Grimm, the hometown hero, Zergev Squadron successfully overshot their allotted time by five hours, spending a total of seven hours in Furoul.

“I’m never going to trust anything you say again!” Wilhelm raged, urging his land dragon on at the head of the group. In the face of the Sword Devil’s anger, all Grimm could do was keep his head down. Given all his grandstanding, it was his best bet after what amounted to a pitiful defeat. Indeed, he would have to reflect carefully on what had gone wrong on this occasion.

“Take it easy, Cap,” Conwood said. “The boy runs away from home and comes back a hero—of course Mom and Dad and the kids want to celebrate…”

“Yeah, and so does every single relative, teacher, and old friend! They were lined up all the way to the next village… What a mess!” Wilhelm’s yelling got even louder as he thought back on the seven-hour festivities.

The truth was, it hardly surprised any of them that Grimm’s village might want to make an event out of his homecoming. Some among his close family had all but burst into tears upon seeing him again.

I guess my parents assumed I was dead, Grimm wrote.

“Given how you looked when I met you, and the fact that they hadn’t heard from you for years, I don’t blame them.”

It had been the shared opinion of the entire squadron at the time that Grimm was not likely to survive for very long. But through a series of coincidences, here he was, still with them. Grimm himself probably wouldn’t disagree calling it a gift of luck.

“That’s a pretty critical hit to our schedule, but the vice-captain’s family sure was happy to see him,” Conwood said. “And as far as patrolling goes, we couldn’t have asked for a more successful display of military presence.”

This whole incident was—

"No, forget it," Wilhelm said, interrupting Grimm as he started to write an apologetic note. "Conwood's right. At least we got the job done."

As a runaway lacking in filial piety just like his old comrade, there was hardly room for Wilhelm to judge. Whatever the situation of the other members of his squadron, Wilhelm no longer had family with whom to get in touch. The fires of war had consumed them, along with his entire hometown. He was just like Grimm in that he had run away and had never contacted his family thereafter. But unlike Grimm, Wilhelm would never have the chance to apologize.

From that perspective, the opportunity for Grimm to reunite with his family and friends was cause for joy.

"We can make up the time," he said. "If you want to show you're sorry about today, just…write to your family sometimes."

"____"

"Anyway, when you come back with Carol one day, it's gonna be even worse, right?"

Trying to put what happened behind them, Wilhelm brought up Grimm's lover. He had seen how ecstatic Grimm's family was to know that their son had attained military rank. If they knew he was going to marry a daughter of the nobility, they would be unimaginably shocked.

Mind your own business. When Grimm finally looked up at Wilhelm again, he was smiling at last.

It seemed to inspire the entire troop, and they set off down the road with renewed vigor. The time line they had been trying to condense as much as possible had been seriously expanded instead, but it still wasn't beyond recovery.

"Luckily, I don't think we have any squad members who hail from any of the other places we're visiting," Conwood said.

"That's a relief," Wilhelm replied. "If I see another parent, friend, family member, or well-wisher, it'll be too soon."

That seems a little on the nose, doesn't it? Grimm seemed less than entirely pleased.

"I just don't want a repeat of Furoul. I'm trying to keep collateral damage low, so to speak."

Regardless of Grimm's reaction, Zergev Squadron hurried down the

Liphas Highway. In due course, they safely arrived at their next destination, Milgre.

This time, there was no massive welcoming party, and they were able to complete their patrol and move on in the shortest possible time.

I'm glad nothing came up. I hope things keep going this way.

"How much time did we make up?"

We're still four hours behind schedule.

"I shouldn't have asked."

Still, they had indeed recovered some time. If things kept going like this, they might manage to be back at the capital with a couple of hours to spare before the wedding.

"At least…"

At least he might get away without upsetting Theresia. Wilhelm knew he was grasping at straws, but it was all he had.

But of course, when one grasps at straws, those straws eventually break.

7

The nobles' quarter of the capital was a place only those with status could live. Brand-new magic lanterns shone in the night along straight-edged flagstone streets that ran among luxurious, elegant buildings. The dragon carriages that rolled through the streets hardly made a sound; the whole place was the height of class.

The country had supposedly grown fatigued by the long civil war, but conflict seemed to have hardly touched this place. The nobles' quarter seemed to rebuff all influences from beyond its borders, like a world unto itself. Any kind of disturbance or fighting was strictly taboo, in deference to the etiquette and tranquility of the area.

Two women walked through the district, their shoes clicking against the ground. One of them walked with her shoulders pulled back, cutting through the air, while the second woman called to the first.

"L-Lady Theresia! Are you—are you really going to confront Lord Veltol?"

"Of course I am, Carol. I'm awfully angry about all this."

Theresia, still marching quickly, pursed her lips at the other woman, who

had golden hair and blue eyes, and gave an overall impression of sharpness. The second woman, Carol, withered under Theresia's gaze.

"Are you saying you oppose me, Carol? That you oppose…my wedding…?"

"Please don't look at me so anxiously, mistress! I would never oppose you in any matter! Though I admit Wilhelm wouldn't be my first choice for a husband…"

"So you *are* against us…"

"——! Please don't put me in such a difficult position; you'll make me cry! I'll be sobbing like a pathetic little baby!"

"S-sorry, I'm sorry. It's all right, Carol, I trust you."

Seeing that the taut beauty was about to break, Theresia rushed to reassure Carol. Her attendant of so many years was normally quite stoic, but when it came to matters in which Theresia was involved, she could sometimes become surprisingly delicate. Recently that tendency had expanded to include her love for Grimm and, because of his connection with Theresia, anything to do with Wilhelm. Carol had become rather emotional and a lover of cute things…

"I'm surprised to learn how much trouble you can be, Carol," Theresia said.

"S-such sudden criticism, milady. I am first among your attendants and the one who helps you navigate this world. I hope you'll continue to rely on me just as you always have."

"Yes. And you've always been very reliable."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Theresia gave Carol an encouraging pat on the shoulder, to which Carol responded with shining eyes and an emphatic nod. She jumped up with a shout before cocking her head in surprise. "Huh? When did I become so obedient to you…?"

"Come on, Father and Mother should be here. Let's go give them a piece of our minds." Theresia roundly ignored Carol's question as they came to one particular house in the nobles' quarter—a place for visitors who had come to the capital from afar. Considering the wedding the next day, Theresia's parents—Veltol, head of the House of Astrea; and his wife, Tishua—were presumably there.

"I thought it was strange when they said they would stay at the guesthouse

instead of at our mansion. I'm sure they just didn't want me to find out what they were scheming."

"I see," Carol said. "If I may ask, milady, what did Lord Veltol say when he declined to stay at the mansion?"

"He claimed the house already belongs to me and Wilhelm as husband and wife, so my parents wouldn't seek to impose upon us… And, uh, well, believe me, I wasn't convinced simply because he called us 'husband and wife,' okay?"

Carol smiled softly. "Of course, I understand. Your Carol is on your side, Lady Theresia."

It was the same smile she had shown at the ceremony after the conclusion of the war, when she had silently watched Theresia about to accept an honor she didn't want. That is to say, a smile that showed she was holding something back within her heart; and Theresia didn't have the courage to ask what it was.

"Anyway, let's go," Theresia said. "And let's make sure this sort of thing never happens again."

"But, milady, what good will it do, even if Lord Veltol admits to his perfidy in this case?"

"I don't care about this time. I'm going to make him promise for the future. After all—" As she headed for the entrance of the guesthouse, Theresia glanced back at Carol. Her eyes held no trace of doubt as she declared, "—Wilhelm *will* make it back for the wedding. He promised to make me his bride. So you don't have to worry about that."

Then, riding that wave of confidence, Theresia reached for the door.

8

Thus, Wilhelm had Theresia's complete trust, but…

"____"

The sky was dark. Incredibly dark. The whole world seemed to be made of this pitch-blackness, without a ray of light anywhere.

The four corners of the world seemed to hold no light in them, and the air felt saturated with sand that rubbed against their skin, carrying a bitterness they could practically taste. The ground beneath their feet was at once hard

yet wet and slippery. It was truly the worst possible environment.

Several clangs of metal against metal rang out through the darkness and disappeared into the far distance. The men strained their ears to follow it, heard it vanish far away, then sighed.

"Deep, huh…?"

There was no room for doubt in the matter, nor was there any response. But that only made sense. Aside from Wilhelm, there were only two other people here in this place. One of them was unconscious in the Sword Devil's arms, and as for the other…

"____"

Wilhelm felt a tap on his shoulder and looked back. He couldn't see the other person's face for the gloom. But through long familiarity, he still knew what the man was thinking. It was scary. And he was giving the worst possible answer.

It was hardly necessary to go in-depth about what a poor combination Grimm and total darkness made. Lack of light was the natural enemy of a man who communicated via the written word. His expression and body language could bring across something of what he was thinking, but in this pitch-blackness, even that much was impossible.

"_____ngh."

"It doesn't matter how desperate you are to talk," he said, "I still don't know what you're trying to say…"

Maybe Grimm was distressed at just how dire the situation was. Hearing the scratchy groan, however, actually made Wilhelm calmer. Humans sometimes grow steadier the more panicked those around them are. Or perhaps that was merely how it seemed. Perhaps Wilhelm had simply encountered such a tremendous spate of bad luck that he had passed through ultimate distress to reach something like enlightenment.

"Ahh…" Wilhelm scratched his cheek and looked up. He could see the collapsed entrance to the cave, but for the life of him, he couldn't reach it. They would have to explore, using the echo from Grimm's metal plate, in the faith that that would be another exit deeper in.

"But even if I survive this, Theresia might kill me instead…"

Before the matter of getting to the wedding on time, it had become questionable whether he would even get home alive. Wilhelm sighed. And with the wedding ceremony only half a day away, the Sword Devil took his

first step deeper into the cave, hoping to escape being buried alive.

9

Carol gulped quietly at the intimidating presence of the man before them. It was very similar to the warrior's aura exuded by a superb swordsman, but it was public knowledge that the man before them had no skill with the sword, and Carol was well acquainted with the fact. Hence, this overwhelming aura must have been a wave of some other strong conviction.

"First, let me thank you for coming all the way to the capital."

Carol felt frozen; beside her, her lifelong mistress struck the spark of the conversation. Her eyes were hard, a gaze that all by itself might have undone a lesser opponent. But this man, so far from being daunted by Theresia's expression, looked her full in the eyes and smiled.

Of course he did. After all, the person facing Theresia wasn't technically an enemy, but—

"Such formality, Theresia. This is a place for family. Don't feel compelled to stand on ceremony."

"Yes, but…"

"Don't make me insist. We are family, and I am your father. There's no need for pomp and circumstance." He smiled at her, a middle-aged gentleman with a rather dashing beard. His height, his rich red hair, and his smiling blue eyes all seemed to bring images of Theresia to mind. As perhaps they should, the two of them being parent and child.

Her father's name was Veltol Astrea. He was indeed Theresia's blood father and current leader of the House of Astrea, for generations home of the line of the Sword Saints, those who stood at the zenith of swordsmanship.

But he was equally famous for the fact that despite his lineage, Veltol himself had absolutely no facility with the blade.

"Carol," Veltol said.

"Y-yes, sir!" Carol responded. "It's been quite a long time, Lord Veltol."

"Leave aside formal greetings. What has gotten into you? You and Theresia both are standing so stiffly. It makes me fear something has happened. No?"

Carol straightened up when the conversation turned to her, unable to conceal her nervousness. It was difficult to judge her precise social distance

from Veltol, and she found conversation with him difficult, for reasons entirely separate from the relationship of Carol's family to the Astreas.

"Father, please don't pick on Carol. She's a very serious young woman."

"Oh, 'pick on' is such an ugly expression. In any event, it looks like you're finally ready. You must be nervous about tomorrow, but I can assure you, you don't have to—"

"Actually, Father, tomorrow is what I've come to talk to you about."

Theresia interrupted Veltol to get directly to the business at hand. Carol took this as her cue to compose herself, and Veltol narrowed his eyes slightly.

"When your daughter is to be a bride tomorrow and comes saying she wants to talk about that morrow, one can't help but feel concerned." Veltol smiled as if to dispel the anxiety. He seemed to feel no pang of conscience at the mention of the next day. The fact made Carol tremble. Veltol's involvement with Wilhelm's patrol was already clear. That made it all the more shocking that he was able to discuss the subject with perfect poise.

"Traditionally, when the bride greets her parents before the wedding, it's to offer her thanks and make them promises about the future. Normally she does this immediately before the proceedings, but then I suppose we would hardly have time to dry our tears. This is quite considerate of you."

"Of course, I do thank you. But that's not what I've come here to say."

Theresia shook her head, causing Veltol to resort to bringing up the worst possibility. "You want to put the wedding off, then, or cancel it? I'm afraid that just can't be done at such a late hour. It would bring such shame upon our family… Yes, a terrible humiliation." He put his hands to his face as if to emphasize what a tragedy it would be. "I wondered what might have brought you and Carol here alone—don't tell me the groom ran out on you? Or is there some disturbing revelation about him? I asked him about his history when we met him, but perhaps he was still hiding something. No, wait… Something about his personality or preferences that wouldn't be evident to the average observer… Is it some deviant sexual desire?"

"Faaatheeer…"

"Calm down, Theresia, there's nothing to be embarrassed about. A husband and wife must, ahem, *want* the same things. We should consider it a blessing that you've discovered this abnormality before you're formally wed. True, it will still be a matter of embarrassment to cancel the ceremony, but

it's more important that—"

"Father, that's enough!"

Theresia finally interrupted her suddenly long-winded parent, her teeth gritted. Veltol's eyes went wide at the sound of her voice, and he fell silent under her stare.

"I haven't said a word yet, Father, but you sound downright eager to embrace that embarrassment."

"Eager? Now, that's very strange. I'm just thinking of your happine—"

"You did something to Wilhelm, didn't you, Father? I know that much."

Veltol didn't seem to know when to quit, so Theresia laid into him with words as sharp as any sword. He was speechless under this assault, until he finally managed to respond.

"And…what if I did?"

Veltol had a thin, cruel, distinctly villainous smile on his lips. Despite the vague fig leaf of *what if*, he clearly had no intention of hiding anything anymore. Theresia's suspicions had been correct. Veltol's smile and his attitude were proof enough.

Theresia let out a small breath to discover this malice on the part of her own father.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me until this moment," she said. "I hereby renounce the Astrea name. Good-bye."

“Wha?! W-wait just one minute, Theresia! Your father won’t allow it!”

“You think I care about what you allow? You should be begging for my forgiveness! Why would you ever do such a thing?! I’ve wondered ever since the interview; what exactly is it you hate so much about my Wilhelm?!”

Theresia, so quick to act, wheeled on Veltol. He was reeling at this fresh attack, his mouth working open and shut. The intimidating aura that had issued from him until a moment earlier was gone. Instead, there was only an astonished, mean little man whose plans had been exposed.

“Your methods, Father, are underhanded! If you don’t like Wilhelm, then say as much. What’s wrong with him? Go ahead, tell me! Is it his achievements? His family background? His ability with the sword? His *looks*? Well, he’s achieved everything that could be hoped of him, he comes from a fine family name, I don’t think I need to tell you about his sword-fighting ability, and frankly, he’s perfectly handsome!”

“L-Lady Theresia, we’re getting off topic…”

“No, we aren’t! Wilhelm is handsome! You think so, don’t you, Carol?!”

“Grimm is first in my heart, so I can’t say!”

Caught up by Theresia’s accelerating pace of conversation, Carol found herself unexpectedly admitting how she really felt. She blushed furiously.

Theresia put a hand to her mouth and said, “Carol, you’re just the sweetest…”

“P-please don’t tease me, Lady Theresia…!”

“Ahem, she’s right, you shouldn’t tease, dear. I think you’ve taken several years off your father’s life.”

“What I said to *you* wasn’t teasing, Father. If things go on as they are, then I’m done with you!”

“What?! Why?!”

“*Why*, indeed! You’re trying to impede my marriage! How can you not understand?!”

Veltol shrank under Theresia’s shouting, looking like he might faint straightaway. Carol suppressed the urge to intervene, waiting to see how things developed.

This back-and-forth between father and daughter was, in fact, perfectly normal.

The dignity with which Veltol had begun the conversation had been completely shattered by his daughter’s emotional outburst. This was not the

first such conversation they had had about Theresia's wedding recently. Carol knew this full well, having heard Theresia complain about it on several occasions.

"You tried to dig up dirt on him before you met him, you introduced new members to Zergev Squadron, trying to get Wilhelm removed from office, and you delayed the wedding again and again in hopes of confusing him…but this is unacceptable! I can't believe I was stupid enough to let you get away with everything for so long!"

"It's because of your gentle heart, Lady Theresia," Carol said. "But I agree that things have gone too far this time."

"What! You too, Carol?" Flagging under the enumeration of his crimes, Veltol found himself the subject of a disdainful look from Carol now as well. His beard bristled as Carol leveled an accusing finger at him.

"Oh, Carol," he said, "daughter of the Remendes family. You and your line have served the House of Astrea for generations. Do you now dare to speak out against the head of that very house?"

"We have served, sir, but I am Carol before I am a Remendes. And my loyalty is not to the Astrea family but to Lady Theresia."

"Hrrghh…!"

The point-blank rebuke left Veltol lost for words. Theresia ignored him, her eyes welling with emotion at Carol's declaration.

"If I had been a man," she said, "I swear I would have made you my bride, Carol."

"It was not to be, milady."

"St-stop right there! I won't allow it! I wouldn't give you to Carol or to anyone!"

"I'm not seriously proposing it," Theresia said. "But more importantly, Father…" She turned to Veltol, who had ended up so cornered that he took even a joking comment seriously. Her eyes narrowed. "You say you wouldn't give me even to Carol? Should I take that to mean that the problem isn't with Wilhelm but elsewhere?"

"Erk…"

"Did you just go 'erk,' Lord Veltol?"

Veltol had turned pale, his whole body trembling. He was not a man with a strong poker face. Although he might have been a little bit harder to read if the matter hadn't concerned his daughter.

Theresia continued to glare at him silently. Veltol's true motives were now apparent, but after so much interference in her wedding, Theresia was in no mood for mercy. She was going to strike the final blow.

Before she could bring him down, however, someone new entered the room and the conversation. "My goodness, such cringing. I think it's about time to give in already."

The three of them looked over, and each had a different reaction. Veltol's face grew even more anemic, while Theresia's cheeks went stiff. Carol, on the other hand, executed a formal bow and said, "Lady Tishua, it's been a long time. Carol is at your service."

"There's no need for formality, dear. You know you're like a daughter to me."

This remark, along with a burst of laughter, came from a woman of ambiguous age, with long, flaxen hair. Her beauty made her look strikingly young; she had an unmistakable allure.

Her name was Tishua Astrea. Veltol's wife and Theresia's—

"Mother."

"You, too, Theresia. Don't puff out those cheeks. I raised you to be a sweet thing—your Wilhelm will fall out of love if you make such faces all the time."

"Wilhelm would never stop loving me…I think."

"Well, isn't that wonderful. And you, dear?"

Tishua smiled broadly at her daughter's obvious fondness for Wilhelm, then looked at her own husband. The glance was enough to set Veltol back on his heels, waving pointedly.

"N-now, just a minute, Tishua. This is, you know, it's all a mistake… Yes, that's it, a misunderstanding."

"Is that so? You mean that you were too lonely to let your daughter go in marriage and thus harassed her husband-to-be in every way you could dream up, including deliberately forcing him into a military assignment that would conflict with the date of the wedding itself, and then were discovered by your daughter, who's now threatening to leave her own family…but it's all simply a misunderstanding?"

"Argh…"

Tishua's assault was even more withering than her daughter's, and Veltol's only response was to slump to his knees. In fact, if anyone else had

overheard the list of the man's wrongdoings, they would have been shocked.

Tishua sighed at her dumbstruck spouse, then turned to her daughter. "I'm so sorry, Theresia. In addition to his being rather mean-hearted, this man is immensely petty and couldn't think his way out of a paper bag—and it's led to such trouble for you and yours."

"Er…Mother, aren't you normally a bit more supportive of Father…?"

"Do you see anything in his actions to support?"

The three women, if not Veltol himself, could agree that there was absolutely nothing.

Under the combined attack of his wife, his daughter, and a girl who was like a daughter, Veltol found his pride in tatters. But even as he cowered, he managed to look them in the eyes. "F-fine, say what you will. But it won't change the facts. If that young man isn't here in time for the wedding, it will be a slight against our house. And then we could never dream of countenancing this marriage. You'll never marry, Theresia…!"

"But why would you…? Father, do you want to hold me back in my life? Why?"

"That is not something we should speak of yet."

"Oh, stop with the portentous act. You just don't want to let go of your dear, sweet daughter. And you'll stop at nothing to keep her."

"Tishua?! Whose side are you on?!"

"What a question. My daughter's, of course."

"Whaaaat?! But why?! You're *my* wife, aren't you?!"

"Did you think a wife must always blindly follow her husband? What a delightful fantasy."

Astounded by Tishua's sharp tongue, Veltol found his figurative ship sinking yet again. His reaction made it plain that his motivations were precisely what Tishua had alleged.

"Shallow thoughts, shallow goals, a shallow man…" Carol sounded exasperated.

"To be fair, that's part of what makes him lovable," Tishua said, looking mischievously at her husband. The relationship between the two of them was somewhat difficult to fathom, but it was clear enough that Tishua really did love Veltol. Even Carol, who had known them for so long, was perplexed by that fact, but so it goes…

"It may be lovable to you, Mother, but for me, it's appalling. I don't know

what straits Wilhelm may be in thanks to Father's ridiculous schemes…"

"As I said, there's not that much to this man. He's not capable of anything truly terrible. Just a few little delaying tactics along the road…minor traps, nothing that could *really* stop the boy. If I had to say, I would call this my husband's last futile struggle."

"His last struggle?" Carol furrowed her brow at Tishua's attempt to assuage Theresia's anxiety.

Tishua looked calmly at Carol from under her long eyelashes and said, "That's right, the very last. He wants to be able to hold up his head as a man of the Astrea family, to be able to say that he tested his daughter's husband-to-be to the bitter end."

"Oh…" Theresia and Carol both looked at Tishua in surprise.

It was, she was saying, the last bit of mischief by Theresia's father—the last man in the Astrea family after the death of Theresia's brothers in the civil war.

"Elder Brother Thames," Theresia said, "Elder Brother Carlan. And Cajiress…" She looked at the ground, speaking the names of three of those who had died in battle. They seemed like good siblings, Carol reflected. At the very least, they had all loved Theresia.

After naming her departed brothers, Theresia looked at Tishua. "If my brothers were still alive…do you think they would have opposed my marriage?"

"I suppose I don't know. Those boys were never as slow-witted as Veltol, so I don't think they would have done anything as ridiculous as this…but they would have tested him, I'm sure. To see if your Wilhelm could bring you happiness."

"He already did, a long time ago."

Tishua smiled at this whisper from Theresia. "It would be to make sure he could continue to do so." She walked over to her collapsed husband, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Now I believe you two have a wedding to prepare for. It's the work of a long day, making a bride as beautiful as she can be for her marriage."

"Yes, Mother. But what about Father…?"

"As I said, this is his last act of resistance. I won't let him get away with anything further. And your dear groom will be able to outdo his little plots. Don't you think?"

Theresia reacted reflexively to her mother's provocation. "Of course I do." Then she frowned. "But, Mother."

By the time she realized she was in the palm of her mother's hand, it was too late. She had been robbed of her reason for cornering Veltol.

"Father truly needs to repent! I'm really, really mad this time!"

"I-I'll think about—okay! I understand! I repent! I truly regret my deeds!" Veltol's dithering turned to genuine surrender under Theresia's pressure. His daughter snorted at him, and Carol gave a weak shrug.

"Gosh, am I tired now…" Theresia said.

"You were amazing, though," Carol said. "I'm rather looking forward to tomorrow myself." A thin smile played across her lips.

Theresia raised an eyebrow. "So you believe Wilhelm will make it, too, Carol? I'm a little surprised…"

"Well, he *does* have Grimm with him. Ahem, that's a joke, but yes, I believe. That man…Wilhelm…would not fail to be there to take you as his bride."

In Carol's mind, she was revisiting the day that the Sword Saint, Theresia, became just a normal girl. It was not Theresia alone who had been saved by Wilhelm on that day. She had never spoken of it, and for all her life never would, but he had saved Carol as well.

The passion of the Sword Devil on that day, the way he fought, remained burned into her mind's eye.

"So, Lady Theresia, let us get ready for tomorrow. It's just as Lady Tishua said—you will be the most beautiful woman in the world tomorrow. Allow me to assist you."

"Carol…"

"The only thing I begrudge that man is that I will have to give my Lady Theresia to him."

"I feel the same way."

"Father—!!"

Carol was simply trying to hide her embarrassment, but Veltol, quick to recover, agreed with her. His words provoked a shout and a blush from Theresia. Behind the redness in her face, however, was less anger and more a pressing anticipation of the next day.

"I'll be waiting…" Theresia whispered, still blushing, to an absent someone she cared deeply about.

That precious, precious man would overcome all of Veltol's mean-spirited interference to be there at the wedding ceremony the next day, to take her as his bride. Of that she was sure.

10

At roughly the same moment that his bride was in the capital, declaring her unwavering faith in him…

"…Dammit, the air smells like earth." The young man spat on the ground with a snarl of frustration, craning his neck for a look around. But eyesight alone was of limited value in a lightless cave enclosed in thick rock walls. He had to find his way along largely by guesswork, following what breeze he could feel and an all-too-thin ray of hope.

He was in Cordoro Mountain, near Cramlin, a town southeast of the capital—in a cave known as the Lair of the Earth Snake. It was considered so dangerous that the locals never went near it. And with half a day to go until his wedding, Wilhelm found himself sealed inside, literally lost in the dark.

It had all started several hours before. Other than the delay in Furoul, Zergev Squadron's frenzied patrol had been going smoothly. They passed through Milgre, famous for its windmills, and Bonobo, renowned for its distilleries, in short order, and soon arrived at their final destination of Cramlin.

The trouble came when the squadron was presented with a report stating that several local children had gone missing. There was every chance that they were simply playing, or had gotten lost, or were pulling a prank. But if some emergency had befallen them, then it came very much within the squadron's mandate as guardians of public safety.

"Captain, if we spend time here, we'll be—"

"Late for the wedding. I know. And what am I going to tell Theresia? 'I abandoned a bunch of kids so I could be with you'? She would personally cut down me and every single member of this squadron."

That's for sure. And Carol would be angry at me, too.

Such was Zergev Squadron's appraisal of the missing-children situation. Wilhelm was firmly against dereliction of duty in favor of prioritizing the

wedding, and not a soul spoke out against him. Instead, they set to work as quickly as possible.

They tasked the locals with searching the town itself, while Zergev Squadron checked out the surrounding countryside. That was what had led them to discover the tracks near Cordoro Mountain and to follow them to the children, who had fallen into the cave.

By that point, they had been in Cramlin for two hours—a painful amount of time but not an irrecoverable loss. Relieved, Wilhelm planned to climb into the cave and help each of the four children out, then return to town.

At least until the moment the earthquake happened, collapsing the entrance to the cave.

It started with just a small tremor and a little crack; then the tremors got bigger and the crack got wider until, in a hail of dust and earth, the former entrance became nothing more than a featureless wall.

In the cave it was only Wilhelm, the last of the four children, and Grimm, who had been catching the kids but had fallen in during the quake.

Several hours later, the three of them were still groping through the darkness.

Straining his eyes for anything to see, Wilhelm muttered into the pitch-blackness. “I thought for sure this would be faster than trying to dig out the entrance…but I’m starting to think it would have been smarter to wait for help.” As if in rebuke, there came a sound of metal that echoed off the walls of the cavern.

The clamor was Grimm protesting. He was striking the metal plate strapped to his left leg as if to say firmly *Don’t give up*.

Since they were prepared for a variety of circumstances, even without words the two could manage a minimum of communication, but it made Grimm’s interjections much more physical and noisy than when he could simply write them down. Wilhelm certainly hadn’t needed Grimm to tell him not to give up; he just wanted to be free of the cave, and that clanging, as quickly as possible.

It was perhaps a blessing that the little boy they had with them had blacked out during the collapse and remained unconscious. Grimm carried the small body with him, Wilhelm going ahead to scout out the cave—following the breeze that blew through the tunnels in hopes of finding another exit.

“____”

Hour after hour slid relentlessly by. There was hardly any light in the cave, and the speed of their search couldn’t even match a snail’s pace. Impatience began to grip them.

The hour of fire had been nearly past when they’d arrived in Cramlin; by now, the sun must have been sinking outside and the temperature starting to drop. The breeze coming into the cave got colder, and their situation grew slightly but steadily worse. They nearly despaired that they would ever be in time for the wedding.

But then—

“Hey, don’t get too far ahead. It’s bad footing. If the ground goes out from under you and you fall, I can’t promise I’ll be able to rescue you.”

Grimm, his breath coming hard, was moving quicker. He appeared more upset than Wilhelm, the man whose wedding they were going to miss, which puzzled Wilhelm. Like everyone else in Zergev Squadron, Grimm had given his blessing to the union between Wilhelm and Theresia, and it was obvious he wanted to get back to the capital as quickly as possible.

“But this isn’t like you. You’re normally all safety-first, making sure you survive before anything else. And *this* is when you decide to get worked up?”

“____!”

Grimm looked back, surprised by words of comfort he was not accustomed to hearing from his old brother in arms. His face was invisible in the darkness, but his gaze felt angry. *How can you act so unconcerned?* he seemed to be asking.

At this rate, they would be late for the wedding. Yet, Wilhelm showed no sign of consternation; his temper had gotten no shorter. He was obviously impatient, but that was as far as it went.

He considered the facts.

“Even if I were to miss the ceremony, she and I already know how we really feel. As long as those feelings haven’t changed, there’s no reason for me to get all bent out of shape.”

“____”

“Besides, I’ve got no intention of being late. I *am* going to make her my bride. I *am* going to come home. I promised her I’d do both those things. If I don’t keep those promises, I’ll probably never get to eat her cooking again.”

Wilhelm boasted boldly to the despondent Grimm. Just for a second, Wilhelm got the impression that Grimm was taken aback by his nonchalant banter. But soon, there came a long sigh, a response very much in character for Grimm.

"____"

"Don't give me that look. I know what you're thinking, even if I can't see you or your piece of paper. And we don't have time to chat, either. Am I wrong?"

The edge had vanished from Grimm's aura and was replaced with something softer, but Wilhelm brushed it off and resumed searching the cavern. He assumed Grimm simply shrugged at his words and went back to looking as well—or he must have tried to, but then came a weak "ah…" in the darkness.

The sound came from Grimm's direction, from the boy he was carrying on his back. The formerly unconscious child shifted, slowly regaining consciousness.

"Ah, oh… Huh…?"

"…You're awake, huh? Do me a favor and try not to make too much noise," Wilhelm said calmly. He could sense the boy's confusion. The boy picked up on Wilhelm's gentle manner as Grimm set him on the ground; he looked for the two of them in the dark, saying, "Wh-where are we…? Who are you, sirs?"

"Us? We're from the capital. We came to find you. We're in a cave in a mountain. We were looking all over for you and your friends. You follow me?"

"Oh, we're in the Lair of the Earth Snake… So this cave must be…" The boy understood from Wilhelm's explanation where they were, and it frightened him terribly.

"You need to stay calm. You're right, this is the cave they call the Lair of the Earth Snake. The entrance collapsed, and we're looking for another way out… Why'd you come here anyway?"

"…The adults told us not to come in here."

"Makes sense. They all but told *us* not to come in here."

"But there have been so many earthquakes lately… My grandpa told me a story once. He said the honored Earth Snake that lives in the mountain causes earthquakes. So…"

The boy trailed off, but Wilhelm took his meaning. “You came to kill the Earth Snake. Awfully brave.”

He’d spoken too soon. With a note of panic in his voice, the boy said, “N-no! We wanted to bring him an offering so he would stop thrashing!” Then he rifled through his bag. He tossed something to the ground—and an instant later, there was a bright light. It was a strong light, the first they’d seen in several hours, and Wilhelm and Grimm both grunted.

“…You brought ragmite, huh?”

“Of course we did—it’s a cave after all. Why didn’t you bring some, sirs?”

“___”

Wilhelm and Grimm exchanged a sour look at having a child call them out on their lack of preparation. But in any event, thanks to the boy, they now had something to see by. This would make their search considerably easier.

Wilhelm held out his hand, and the boy reluctantly handed over the stone. A ragmite crystal. Wilhelm felt the shining thing in his hand as he said, “I admire the spirit you and your friends showed, but you’re too weak for this job. Work on your swordsmanship before you do something like this again so you don’t cause this kind of trouble for everyone.”

“Er… Right, yes, sir. I’m sorry.” The boy hung his head, the advice somewhat unexpected. Now, though, between the light and the wind, they might be able to find where the breeze was coming from and discover a way out. Wilhelm dreaded to think how much time would have passed when they finally emerged…

“But we’ll worry about that when we get out. Much as I hate superstitions like the Earth Snake.”

The kids had been, in their own way, thinking of the town. There was no point in being angry at them forever about it. But Wilhelm’s positive, almost-optimistic mutter caused the boy’s eyes to go wide.

“Superstitions?” he asked. “But the Earth Snake is real.”

“___”

Wilhelm narrowed his eyes at the boy’s startled pronouncement. Immediately thereafter, and from directly beside Wilhelm, Grimm gave a sharp ring of his metal plate, touching the nape of his own neck. The echoing sound of metal was the strongest warning he could give.

Grimm had a finely honed sense of danger, and even Wilhelm typically

deferred to his perception. Grimm's reaction heralded the onset of true danger.

"Shit, is something—?"

Wilhelm was about to say *coming*, but before he could ask, it was there.

Sword drawn, he held up the light to see deeper into the cave. No sooner had he done so than a shadow passed in front of the bright fluorescence, a surge approaching them through the cavern with a frenzied rumbling.

"_____!!!"

It crashed and writhed, a creature that filled the entire tunnel ahead of them, many times the size of Wilhelm or his companions. For an instant, they doubted their own sense of reality.

A second later, the great, twisting shadow launched itself at them.

"____?!"

The relentless wave of destruction caused a second collapse.

11

The so-called Earth Snake took the form of a massive worm, more than thirty feet in length. It had no eyes, which it did not need underground, and its squirming body had no arms or legs. There were, however, twisted horns growing from its dark brow, making the hideousness of its bloodline apparent at a glance.

The horns were proof that it was a demon beast, one of the archnemeses of humanity. Demon beasts were driven by the desire to devastate all forms of life—meaning that the three of them, having unintentionally wandered into its hunting grounds, were now the targets of its merciless attempts at destruction.

"____!!"

Its tail came crashing down on Grimm's raised shield. As a shield bearer, he had an exceptional ability to read an incoming attack. They were facing a demon beast, a great, fast creature, and yet he had easily predicted and intercepted the enemy's first strike.

"____"

Grimm put all his strength into his shield, deflecting the blow to one side. Instead of hitting its target, it crashed into the stone wall of the tunnel, causing the entire cavern to quiver.

“Hrrk, haak—!” Grimm shook his head with the force of it, blood dribbling from his mouth. He had blocked the blow but couldn’t entirely defeat it. There was an uncomfortable noise from his arms, and he had fallen to his knees. It was unlikely he would be able to deflect a second strike.

Even so, he had bought them an opening, however brief. He trusted that the Sword Devil would be able to use it like no one else.

“Good work.”

Just two words that nonetheless constituted the highest praise—followed by a cascade of silver flashes in the dark.

The cuts came from every direction and without respite, tearing into the body of the motionless Earth Snake. The monster’s skin was very flexible, its slippery surface highly resistant to claws or blades.

But whenever the Sword Devil found one of his blows rebuffed, he changed his approach for the next one. The angle, the intensity, became more precise with every stroke, until finally he broke through the creature’s defenses—

“Rrruuuaahhhh!!”

Wilhelm continued his assault with a great howl, blood spattering back upon him.

Overwhelmed by the shouting and the incredible assault, the demon beast withdrew, its body spurting blood. They could hear it slithering along the ground, and the distance between themselves and the Earth Snake suddenly increased dramatically.

“Grimm, get up! This is a bad place! Let’s move!” Wilhelm grabbed Grimm by the shoulder, helping him to his feet, then grasped the petrified young boy under his arm. Neither of his companions was able to move quickly, but this spot left them at too much of a disadvantage to finish the fight. He set off running deeper into the cave, relying once more on the light of the ragmite crystal.

But it was as he was running that Wilhelm realized something. This cavern was no natural formation; the irregular tunnels had been cleared by the snake as it moved.

“And that means…!”

That meant it was likely that no matter how far they ran, the tunnel would never get any wider. They would be forced to fight the Earth Snake in a space exactly as large as their opponent.

“We can keep running, but things are only going to get worse for us…”

The assessment came from his deepest fighting instincts, and Wilhelm stopped where he was. He passed the boy to Grimm, then stood with his sword at the ready, looking over his shoulder. Grimm took the child silently, then grunted something to Wilhelm.

“Neither of us can do what we’re best at in here!” Wilhelm said as Grimm backed up. “This is the best way to get out of here alive! While I’m going at it with that thing, you run deeper in!” Then he gave the ragmite crystal a smack with his sword, splitting it in two. Even when divided in half, the crystal lost none of its potency. He gave one of the now-smaller lights to Grimm, Wilhelm holding the remaining crystal in his mouth.

“Get going—!”

Carrying the light and the boy, Grimm started running deeper into the cave. The sound of his retreating footsteps was gradually wiped out by the rasp of soil under a great, approaching body. In the light of the crystal in Wilhelm’s mouth, he saw an eyeless, open-jawed monster approach…

“Rruuuuaaahhhh—!”

Straining, he aimed a blow at the demon beast’s forehead. His sword bounced off the creature’s skin, but then his excessive commitment to battle found its target anew, and he drove his blade through the monster’s flesh.

The fluids inside the creature burst forth, their color obscured by the darkness, and Wilhelm bellowed as they drenched his body. But that was as far as his blade went. His enemy’s strength was not blunted, and it smashed into him, sending him flying.

“Gah!”

He slammed into a rock wall, driving the breath from his lungs, but still he quickly spun to the side. Barely an instant later, a follow-up attack from the monster crashed into the place he had just been lying, gouging out a piece of the wall. The impact popped the crystal from between his teeth. The light rolled over to settle just in front of the creature, which was raising its head.

“___”

He needed his light back—or not, he judged instantaneously.

Wilhelm leaped in, scooping up the shimmering rock with the tip of his sword, diving through the air. With the crystal still balanced upon it, the blade drove deep into the wound once more. The monster, bereft of vocal organs, could only thrash violently, crashing about in the confined tunnel.

Wilhelm couldn't escape the monster's convulsions and slammed into the wall several times. Blood came from a split on his forehead. But he had achieved his goal.

"Now I'll know exactly where you are."

With the ragmite crystal lodged in it, the monster's head glowed brightly. Wherever in the tunnels the creature might go now, he would never lose track of it.

The sightless Earth Snake was unaware of this fact; it retreated into the darkness as it normally did when hunting, hoping to seize its prey from a fatal angle. But instead—

"I can see you, you fool!"

The attack from the great beast was impossibly quiet, but Wilhelm dodged it by a hair's breadth. Even when he knew where the attack was coming from, the tunnel was hardly large enough for him to avoid it. He had to wait until the last possible moment, then edge away. Again and again. Sometimes he managed to strike the beast with his sword in passing, but he never landed anything resembling a critical blow. Whether attacking or falling back, this space afforded him no freedom. At least…

"—?! Grimm?!"

In the middle of the battle, he suddenly heard a repeated, high-pitched sound from deep in the cave. It seemed a desperate noise, but to Wilhelm it communicated a clear instruction.

Emergency summons—it meant to come, no matter what.

"___"

Wilhelm did as the metal plate told him, hurrying deeper into the cave. The demon beast happily followed him in his flight, but the glow from its brow in fact lit the way for him, ironically aiding him as he made his escape.

He exited the labyrinthine path, jumped over a fissure, and finally saw an end to the dark tunnel…

"Grimm!"

At the very edges of the light, he saw Grimm at the dead end of the tunnel, both hands outstretched. As Wilhelm called his name, a question flitted through his mind. He didn't see the boy whom he had entrusted to the shield bearer. Why were they at a dead end? Why had Grimm summoned him here? And why was he looking at him with such trust in his eyes—?

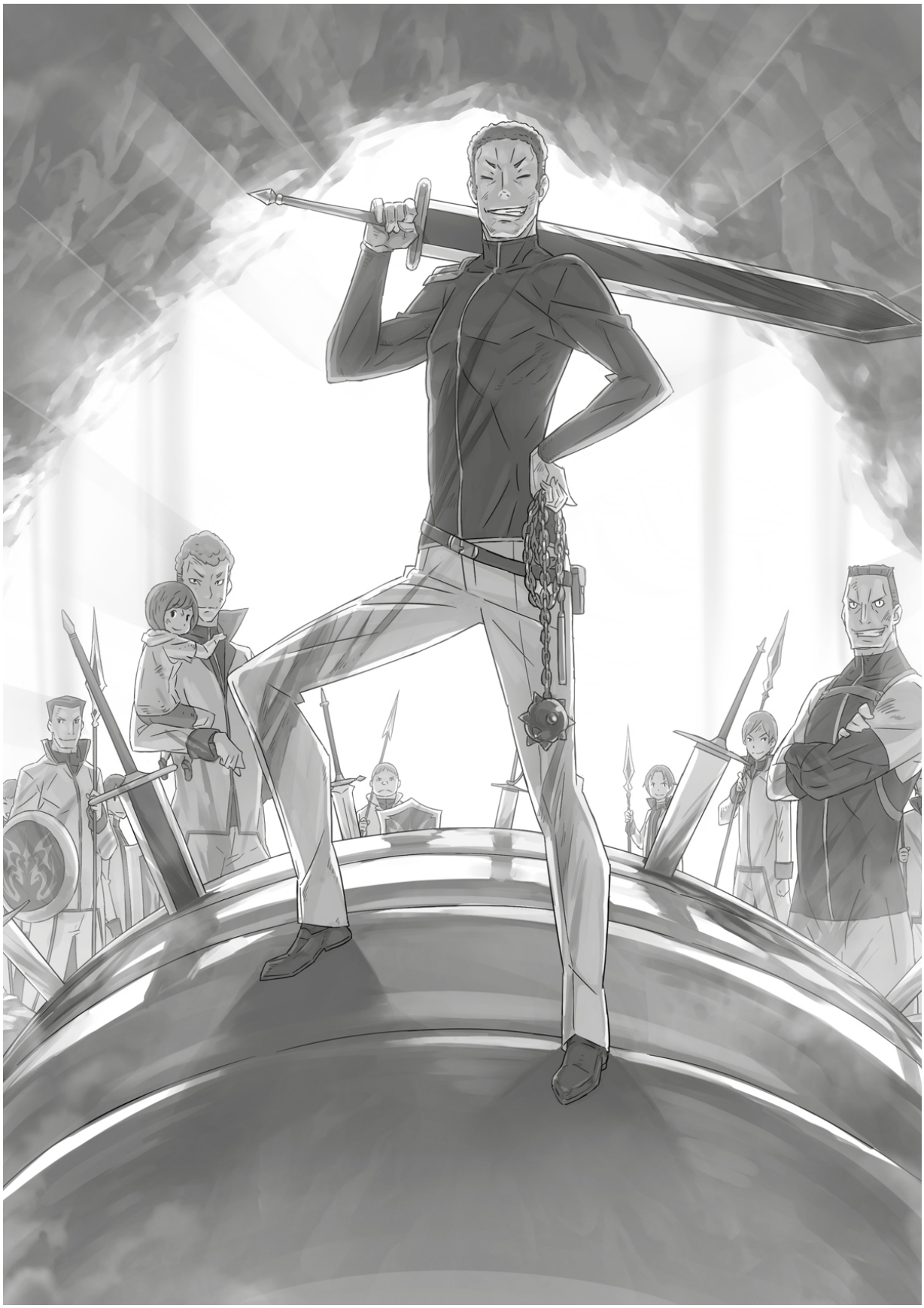
"___"

Wilhelm threw himself at Grimm, and both of them jumped to one side. The demon beast that had been chasing Wilhelm failed to follow them, and it slammed headfirst into the wall.

There was a great smash, and a burst of dust blasted Wilhelm and Grimm. The impact immediately collapsed the wall the creature had struck. There was yet another cave-in, the narrow tunnel filling with dirt. But that was not the biggest change. That distinction belonged to the thin ray of light filtering in through the shattered wall and ceiling.

"Zergev Squadron, full assault!!"

They heard a great bellow of an order, and then a furious clanging of swords. It was the sound of their comrades mercilessly attacking the Earth Snake, whose momentum had carried it clear out of the mountain.



“Battle concluded. Captain and vice-captain successfully recovered!” Conwood stepped up onto the demon beast’s corpse, grinning down at Wilhelm and Grimm where they sat buried in earth.

It was all Wilhelm could do to growl, “Took you long enough.”

12

The wedding ceremony was set to begin just after the hour of fire had passed. The moment was nearly upon them, and the ceremony hall was already packed with attendees. Each had high hopes for the beautiful Sword Saint’s wedding ceremony.

“And after all those times I said I’d be happy with a small ceremony with only family…” Theresia muttered when she heard the lively bustle of the hall.

“Lady Theresia, no! The entire country is watching your wedding. And I believe that’s only right and natural,” Carol replied. As the attendant of the bride, Carol was also wearing an elegant dress. It enhanced her own courtly beauty, but Carol herself seemed indifferent to it.

At that moment, she had eyes for nothing and no one but Theresia.

“Lady Theresia, you are truly beautiful. It’s enough to make me want to take you away and keep you for myself.”

“I might even accept that from you, Carol…but I’m sure Wilhelm would come after us, and you’d have to fight him. I don’t want you to fight over me!”

“As you are now, Lady Theresia, I think it would be worth it even if I had to do battle with the sword.”

The exchange was joking, but the praise was real, and Theresia put a hand to her mouth and laughed. No compliment could do justice to the way she looked in her white bridal gown. She was so sweet and gorgeous that even Carol found her throat dry, almost blinded by the bride’s beauty.

Theresia had simply gathered up her long, rich red hair and put on a touch of makeup, but it created an entirely different impression from normal. If with sword in hand she was an imposing hero, when filled with love she was like a faerie of flowers. Carol couldn’t resist a rush of pride to have helped Theresia dress and make herself up. The only fly in the ointment was that she should have to give up the gorgeous Theresia as bride to such an uncouth

man.

"Perhaps I really will run away with you…"

"C-Carol? Are you okay? You sounded a little too serious just now…"

"Please don't worry yourself, mistress. It's merely a joke…for now."

Carol averted her eyes from Theresia's piteous gaze, trying to divert attention from herself. Her efforts were interrupted by the slamming of the door to the room where she was waiting.

"T-Theresia! Is young Wilhelm not back yet? If he doesn't hurry, the ceremony will begin! And there's a man who looks very much like His Majesty the King in the audience… I can't imagine it's really him, yet— Ahh, but the accoutrements of a bride do become you!"

"Father, you're quite the nuisance…"

Veltol had bustled into the room, entirely unable to contain or calm himself. He looked from the hall to the preparation room and back, incapable of settling on a single topic of conversation, until finally his fatherly heart was overwhelmed by the sight of Theresia in her dress.

Theresia frowned at all this, but the gaze she directed at her father was without anger; in fact, there was a tremendous, measured gentleness in it.

As was made clear by Veltol's consternation, Zergev Squadron had not yet come back from its patrol. The fact that they were more than half a day late for their expected return suggested they had run into some kind of trouble. Given that Veltol had, in fact, plotted several such hurdles for them, it was perhaps less than logical that he should be so alarmed, but still…

"You see? If you had simply accepted this like a man, instead of reaching for absurd schemes, this would never have happened."

The weepy Veltol was followed into the room by Tishua in a dress that befitted the mother of the bride. She looked at her daughter, the bride herself. For an instant, the eyes of the ever-cool Tishua swirled with intense emotion. Carol couldn't quite tell which emotion it was. But then Tishua said simply, "You are beautiful, Theresia. I'm sure your brothers would have been so happy."

"Yes," Theresia said, a faint smile on her face. "Thank you, Mother… And my brothers, as well. And you, Father." She nodded. Veltol, whom Theresia seemed to have mentioned almost as an afterthought, nonetheless welled up at her words and blew his nose on his handkerchief.

"She's right," Veltol said. "Your brothers would surely have blessed you

on this day, Theresia."

"You try to make it sound so happy, Father, but I still haven't forgiven you, you know."

"Whaaaaat?! Even with the ceremony so near at hand?! Anyway, surely we have a more pressing problem right now!"

"And who's responsible for that problem, I wonder…?"

"Lady Theresia, if you get too excited, you'll ruin your hair and makeup. And Lord Veltol, please stop antagonizing Lady Theresia. Consider the time and place."

"Listen to how even Carol speaks to me thus!" Veltol said sharply (it seemed he was still somewhat unrepentant), but Carol was already taking stock of Theresia. It was undeniable that Wilhelm and his companions were not yet back. If, hypothetically, the groom should truly fail to return, the entire ceremony would be a waste, and it would be a great slap in all their faces.

"It's all right. Even if the worst should happen…I don't need anyone's permission."

"Lady Theresia?"

"I don't care about my father's little games. If Wilhelm isn't in time for the wedding ceremony, we'll go somewhere far away to be married. I became his long ago, and he mine. We can never be torn apart. That's why I can hold my head high."

As far as the kingdom was concerned, this was a marriage between the Sword Saint and a knight. But to Theresia herself, it was simply the wedding of one man and one woman—and demanded no more pomp than that. She was grateful to the attendees and happy for their blessings. But even so…

"I've never been happier than when Wilhelm came for me that day."

Carol almost forgot to breathe at the sight of Theresia's flowerlike smile. The same was true of Veltol and even Tishua. All of them knew the bride could have no truer, no more profound smile. She and Wilhelm had already been bound together. Sometime long ago, no doubt in that field of flowers.

And then—

"I hear some commotion outside," Tishua said in surprise. She looked toward the door. At that exact moment, there was a knock, and in peeked a giant with his head bowed.

The polite but well-muscled man was Bordeaux. He smiled broadly and gave a forceful nod.

“I’m sorry to leave you to fret for so long,” he said. “They’re finally back.”

And so it was: At nearly the moment the ceremony was to begin, news had come of the groom’s return to the capital.

13

Just before the door of the ceremony hall opened, Theresia could feel her heart pounding. She had been so calm waiting for this crucial moment, yet now that it had come, all her composure abandoned her. It reminded her that even she was just a frail human.

No doubt the man on the other side of the door had something to do with it. He and he alone, her groom, could transform Theresia into “just” Theresia—not the Sword Saint, not a fighter, but simply who she was.

“Although I don’t think he knows that,” she murmured with a smile.

“Theresia, it’s time,” Veltol said from beside her, holding out his arm.

As tradition dictated, the bride and her father would proceed into the venue arm in arm. Theresia linked her arm with Veltol’s, the hem of her long dress shifting. She felt his body heat, the tension in his arm, and she let out a small breath.

“Father, I’m sorry for causing you such trouble. I’m going to be happy.”

“…! If you make me cry now, the House of Astrea won’t be able to hold up its head.”

“That’s why I said it.”

“You always were my most troublesome child.”

The words were a bit of a jab back at her, but Theresia pushed aside the emotions they provoked and smiled at her father. He nodded, then opened the door to the hall.

Light spilled out upon them, along with a vision of the royal chapel decked out for the ceremony. The aisle they walked through the church was covered with flowers—yellow petals from that field where Theresia and Wilhelm had met, countless scores of them.

It was probably Carol’s doing. Thinking what a naughty thing it was, Theresia looked at the participants at the far end of the aisle. But what she saw left her blinking.

“____”

Beside the elegant, impeccably attired party, they stood proudly. They were covered in dust and sweat and grime and still wearing armor and cloaks. In addition to their dismal state, it was all too clear they had gone without sleep—yet there stood the assembled soldiers of Zergev Squadron.

It was certainly not the way one ought to dress for a once-in-a-lifetime wedding like this. It would have been perfectly acceptable grounds for kicking them out of the venue with a stern scolding. Out of the corner of her eye, Theresia could see the shock on Veltol's face.

But as for her, she only closed her eyes briefly, deeply grateful that they were there at all.

Thank you.

She couldn't speak the words aloud but nonetheless expressed her gratitude to the filthy, exhausted soldiers. If getting dressed up to celebrate this occasion was considered a kindness, then the same must also be said of those who had rushed to be present, no matter the cost.

Theresia, who had fought alongside these very warriors many a time, knew who they were. To receive their blessing was a great honor for her both as the Sword Saint and as a woman.

As she walked down the red-carpeted aisle, the attendees applauded her. She pulled on Veltol's arm, smiling wryly at her father. He was so full of emotion, it was difficult to tell which of them was the bride.

As she passed Zergev Squadron, they straightened up and clapped for her, and she favored them with a small bow. They responded with a collective perfect salute, an image that burned itself into her memory.

Grimm and Carol were lined up together to one side of the squadron, both of them watching Theresia. She was sure they would soon have the chance to be on the other side of an occasion like this. She vowed that when they did, she would celebrate them more fervently than anyone else.

Beside them she could see Bordeaux, along with several other kingdom VIPs. There was a hooded figure beside Bordeaux—His Majesty Jionis himself—and she smiled even as she registered surprise.

She savored her heartfelt thanks toward everyone who had gone out of their way to be a part of this ceremony.

And then…

"Wilhelm…"

At the end of the aisle, one man stood on a dais, looking down at her.

Theresia spoke his name, then let go of Veltol's arm. The young man stepped down from the platform and took her newly free arm, wrapping her in his own.

It was that moment when the bride left her father to join her husband. Theresia closed her eyes, thinking about it, breathing deep the smell of the young man embracing her.

"You stink…again."

The words, and her smile, encapsulated her appreciation for the man who had fought so hard to be here with her.

14

The battle with the Earth Snake had ended just at dawn on the day of the wedding.

Conwood was explaining the situation to Wilhelm after rescuing him from being buried alive.

"It was thanks to Vice-Captain Grimm's quick thinking," he said. "The space where the wind was getting into the cave was too small for an adult to squeeze through, but big enough for a child. So he had the kid bring us a message…"

"He set the squadron in ambush, then had the demon beast collapse the cave, huh?" Wilhelm said. "I'm surprised you could tell where we were going to show up."

"We were more frantic than you probably realize, Captain. The squad was canvassing the whole mountain."

And then, of course, Grimm's little surprise and Zergev Squadron's all-out attack had destroyed the beast. Cramlin was safe, the children were safe, and as far as public order went, the patrol had been a resounding success.

"Now all we have to do is ride our land dragons ragged to get you back to the capital, sir…or at least to the wedding hall. Come on, there's no time to rest. Let's go!"

Conwood's fierce enthusiasm forced Wilhelm to finally voice his doubts. "I appreciate it, but…why are you all so bent on this? Is Theresia's and my wedding that important?"

Conwood, halfway onto his dragon already, snorted. "We told you. We can hardly leave Lady Theresia standing at the altar by herself. She…she's a

girl who deserves to be happy."

"____"

"Captain… I mean, Wilhelm. Maybe you don't realize it." The usual jovial tone had left Conwood's voice, and he looked uncommonly serious. He spoke the way he had spoken back when he and Wilhelm had just been two comrades in arms. "But we fought with her, with the Sword Saint, in a lot of battles in the civil war. If we're still alive, it's thanks to her. That's no exaggeration."

Conwood looked dead ahead, hands on the reins of his racing land dragon. Just for a second, Wilhelm saw his eyes flash with self-recrimination.

"I was overwhelmed by her strength—by the Sword Saint's sword," Conwood said. "So when you finally beat her that day at the ceremony, I could hardly stand it."

"Hardly stand what?"

"The fact that we had never realized that the Sword Saint was also just a normal girl." He gritted his teeth; Wilhelm could see the dejection on his face. Then the tension in his cheeks softened, and he gave a weak smile. "I know it's just a matter of fact to you, but we had never seen it. The Sword Saint was the epitome of strength, the person we had relied on for years. We never thought she was a girl with her own weaknesses."

"____"

"We made her carry a sword, made her fight—and we call ourselves knights? We call ourselves the bold, heroic Zergev Squadron? That's why we're all grateful to you for taking the sword from her. We weren't good enough to call ourselves knights or men, and you woke us up to what we had to do."

Then Conwood stopped speaking and smacked himself hard on each cheek. In the space of an instant, he had once more relinquished the familiarity of an old comrade. "That's why we need you to make her happy, Captain. So let's get a move on! I mean, we'd better hurry, sir. Even if we won't have time to wash or change."

"So she won't have to stand there by herself, huh?"

"Exactly, sir."

Now Conwood gave a great, broad grin, provoking a snort from Wilhelm, who put the spurs to his land dragon.

Thus, Zergev Squadron returned to the capital, postponed their after-action report, and rushed to the wedding ceremony…

"You stink…again."

Wilhelm smiled as the girl in his arms wrinkled her nose at him. For once, he couldn't deny it. He'd had time for neither sleep nor hygiene while on this patrol. He had intended on a thorough washing before he showed up at the church, but in the end, he hadn't had time.

Indeed, there was not a single absentee among those who had been invited to the wedding; all were present. Wilhelm hadn't had time to wash, but at least he had been able to change out of his armor. He hoped that would be enough.

Still, though…

"I do feel bad about it."

"No, don't. This is your smell, Wilhelm. This is you."

"My smell is dirt and sweat? I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"I didn't mean it that way. Silly."

As they stood there, holding each other, Wilhelm gazed directly across at Veltol. The man who was most likely responsible both for his patrol assignment and the various obstacles he'd encountered along the way. Considering the physical and emotional tribulations he had just endured, he doubted anyone would blame him for having a few terse words for the man.

"Lord Veltol. I'm here to receive your daughter, Theresia."

The words he finally spoke, though, were bereft of resentment. He said what he had to say to the person to whom he had to say it.

And Veltol, his face stiff, responded in kind. "…I want you to make her happy."

"I swear it. You don't want it more than I do."

She was, after all, his bride, the beloved woman he was taking as his wife.

Theresia's cheeks went red at this declaration, and Veltol's eyes widened. But shortly thereafter, he bowed, as the father of the bride, and returned to his seat beside his own wife.

Now Theresia and Wilhelm alone remained in the aisle, the two people this ceremony was to celebrate. Wilhelm had managed to change into an

appropriate outfit, but his hair was still a mess and his face was still dirty; as grooms went, he was not the most impressive.

Theresia, on the other hand, in her white dress, might have been the most beautiful bride in the world.

"I'll ask you what you think of my dress…after the ceremony, okay?" she said.

"Honestly, I'm not confident I can put it into words."

"Then you can show me with your actions."

"…Well, that might get out of hand fast."

"Huh?"

The groom let out a familiar sigh at his bride, altogether unaware of exactly how attractive she was. Finally, Wilhelm let her go from the embrace, this time picking her up instead. Theresia was a touch startled to feel his arms around her legs and waist as he carried her up to the altar. He treated her light frame as if it were the most fragile and precious thing in the entire world.

"Oh, put me down, you're embarrassing me…!"

"I have to show off exactly who you belong to."

"I think you did that at another ceremony long ago, and the whole country knows it!"

Wilhelm tilted his head at that, as if to say, *Huh, maybe*. His half-baked excuses didn't mean much anyway. Ultimately, he had done it because he wanted to.

He had simply wanted to brag that this sweetest and most beautiful of women was his bride.

The ceremony proceeded.

Bride and groom faced each other at the altar, where Miklotov, as the officiant, gave a lengthy speech. Wilhelm and Theresia, who only really paid attention to about half of what he said, exchanged vows of love for each other…

"Now then, and albeit for the second time, you may share a kiss, a vow of love before all present." (Was the editorializing really necessary?) Wilhelm took a step toward Theresia.

"Wilhelm," she said, "I love you."

“____”

“What about you?”

To his bride’s teasing question, Wilhelm did not respond with words.

Instead, as she had asked, he answered with his actions, bringing his lips to hers.

The day of that wedding was the sequel to the love song of the sword devil, the romance that would be sung long into the future…

It was a beautiful day, and a fitting end to the tumultuous and wonderful first act of the Love Ballad of the Sword Devil.

<END>

THE LOVE BALLAD OF THE SWORD DEVIL

The Silver Flower Dance of Pictat

1

The Sword Devil heard the whoosh of a blade as he leaped off the ground, escaping death by inches.

In the corner of his vision, the Sword Devil saw the dust he had kicked up; he twisted and struck. A flash of silver reached for his opponent's broad neck, seeking the fatal blow, but it was deflected by a stroke from below.

"____"

There wasn't even time for an irritated click of the tongue.

The Sword Devil used the force of the block to fling himself backward. It might seem foolish to jump into the air, where there was no escape, but at this moment, he had nowhere else to go…

"Shrrrr!"

Instantaneously, blades lashed out from three directions, grazing his skin and releasing a mist of blood. Still, he avoided any fatal wounds. His accelerated awareness put aside pain as the bloodied Sword Devil spun in midair to launch a reverse strike at the giant just in front of him.

The tip of his sword cut into the blue-black shoulder, shallow. It wasn't enough to sever the arm, and no sooner had he gritted his teeth than a blow came in reply.

"Hrrgh—!"

His side caved under a fist at least the size of a child's head. His ribs cried out under the impact, and he was thrown to the side. He smashed against the stone edging, landing on the ground without time to break his fall. His forehead split against the flagstones, and when he looked up, he could taste blood on his tongue. No follow-up attack came. His enemy was hardly unwounded.

“____”

The Sword Devil rose to one knee, looking up at a giant standing with his arms crossed before him. The giant was looking in perplexity at his own arm —the limb he had used to throw the Sword Devil, and which had now been cut off at the wrist. The wound was spurting blood, and the fist itself was rolling around by his feet.

The wounds looked quite severe at first glance. The Sword Devil was plenty injured himself, but it was clear that he was better off than an opponent who had just lost his left hand.

If only that opponent hadn’t had three more left hands to spare.

“Long has it been since I was blessed by such an enemy… A rare happiness indeed,” the great, bare, blue creature rumbled, his arm beginning to swell up. At that moment, the blood ceased gushing from the handless arm. He had squeezed his remaining muscles in that limb to forcibly stop the flow. It was not a matter of whether such a thing should be possible. Seeing was believing.

“…What are you, some kind of monster?”

“Such a lonely thing you say, fine foe of mine. You and I are both beings equally uncanny.”

“Pff… Is that how a man justifies trying to steal someone’s woman? Nice try.”

“When I fell an enemy so powerful as you, I shall claim her as is proper. Nothing is hard to grasp about this.”

“Spoken like a true barbarian.”

“It is the way of we beasts who live by the sword.”

The eight-armed battle god graced the Sword Devil, who was hacking up blood and phlegm, with a warrior’s smile. The expression reflected his overwhelming combat ability, but the Sword Devil faced him undaunted.

Of course. To withdraw was not an option. After all…

“____”

From one side of the stone bridge, he could feel a pair of eyes on his back.

This superhuman battle was being observed by a great many eyes. Countless gazes were upon him, countless emotions roiling; he felt them on his skin.

But for the Sword Devil, only one of them mattered. He simply had to feel

that one, and it was powerful.

"____"

Eyes clear as a blue sky, beautiful hair as red as a flame in the wind, heart unclouded by any doubt as to the Sword Devil's victory.

So long as those eyes were set upon him, he could not lose to anyone. And so…

"You just keep talking. I'm going to beat you…Eight-Arms Kurgan."

"Then I shall give your name to the child I bear by your princess—Sword Devil, Wilhelm."

The seven great arms held the huge blades, "Devil Cleavers." Kurgan, whose technique had repelled even the Sword Saint, prepared for battle, his whole body overflowing with a warrior's aura.

The endless frenzied combat, the life-and-death fight, the duel between the Sword Devil and Eight-Arms…

The Silver Flower Dance of Pictat: the deadly duel that would be known throughout the land.

Its beginning and its conclusion would form another chapter in the Love Ballad of the Sword Devil, the tale of that young man and woman.

2

"Stupid, stupid Father! I give up!"

A beautiful voice rang through the mansion early one morning, scaring the birds in the garden into flight. As the sound of startled wings receded, the world settled into a moment of silence. But the frozen moment swiftly melted away, and a tall, thin, bearded man launched into action.

His composed exterior was completely belied by the frantic waving of his hands. "W-wait, Theresia. Don't you think it's a little soon to be getting so angry? Can't you listen calmly to your father's idea before you—"

"Your *ideas*, Father, are what come too soon! How could you decide something so important without even mentioning it to me?! Is what I'm saying so strange?!"

"Of course, it's because I wanted to surprise you, my dear daughter."

“Oh, I am surprised. Absolutely shocked. In the worst possible way! Enough to make me want to leave this family!”

“What?! But why?! Family is all I’m thinking of!”

The girl gave a dramatic, exhausted sigh at the stuttering man.

She was a lovely girl with beautiful red hair and eyes the color of the sky. She wore a simple white outfit that, although plain, nonetheless brought out her feminine beauty. Her arms were crossed in a way that emphasized her surprisingly generous bust.

Her name was Theresia van Astrea, and she was the owner of this house. She was the daughter of Veltol Astrea, who stood across from her. In other words, this was an argument between father and daughter.

What’s more, such arguments between them were not unusual. In fact, they occurred quite frequently. Almost every time Veltol came to visit Theresia.

And indeed…

“How many times do you plan to visit this house in a month anyway, Father?! You’ve been here practically half the time! Do you understand what these days mean to me?! That I’m a newlywed?!”

“Of course I understand! That’s why I need to keep an eye on you, so you two young people don’t do anything rash. If that isn’t concern for my daughter, then what is?”

“I hope a land dragon kicks you in the head, Father!”

“Whaa?! I recognize that saying—from Kararagi!”

The young bride’s father was trying to hold his head high in the newlyweds’ home only to receive a heartfelt scolding from his daughter.

Wilhelm, watching the argument from the sofa, sighed. Suddenly, a cup of tea appeared in front of him. When he saw the person offering it to him, an elegant woman with flaxen hair, he straightened up.

“I’m sorry, Wilhelm. My husband and daughter are always this way.”

“Yeah, well, the stupid antics don’t— I mean, I guess you could say I’m used to it by now. And it’s not like I don’t understand how Honorable Father feels. He just freaks out a little— Er, I mean, he’s simply worried about his daughter.”

The woman smiled as Wilhelm struggled with the niceties of aristocratic language. “Oh, there’s no need to watch your language in front of me. We’re family now. I just wish that man had the guts to recognize it already.” Wilhelm saw in the woman’s smile a shadow of that smile he loved most. Of

course he did. This woman was Tishua Astrea, Theresia's mother.

That morning, Veltol and Tishua had showed up at the Astrea annex—the house in which Wilhelm and Theresia were making their new life together. And just as Theresia lamented, their visits seemed to be a very frequent occurrence.

"Good morning… And what seems to be the crisis today?"

A new visitor appeared at the door, remarking upon the familiar sound of argument. She was a woman with shining golden hair that went down to her shoulders, along with a serious visage and an all-around refined look. This was Carol Remendes, Theresia's attendant; she had a history with Wilhelm as well. Her family had long served the Astreas, and these arguments between father and daughter were well-trodden ground to her—clearly, as she ignored the bickering pair to ask a question of Tishua.

"Good morning, Carol. Yes, that's an excellent question. If you don't mind my asking, what would you guess it is?"

"I might suspect Lady Theresia finally snapped at the frequency of your honorable visits."

"You suspect exactly right. Of course, given *his* single-mindedness, it's not that hard to figure out." Tishua smiled.

Carol drew a face. "*Sigh*… Is that so?" This was her mistress's father. She seemed to be disappointed because her desire to find something to like about Veltol had so far gone unfulfilled. Wilhelm refrained from pointing out that her very disappointment was itself rather rude.

Then, noticing that the three of them had set aside morning formalities to complain about Veltol, Theresia exclaimed, "Carol! Listen, Carol! My father has gone and done the most selfish, boorish thing—again! But he doesn't even feel guilty about it… Oh, and good morning."

"Good morning, Lady Theresia. I profoundly sympathize with your frustrations, truly I do, but you mustn't be too critical of your father. Think how sad he'll be."

"Listen to her, Theresia. You could learn a thing or two from that respectful attitude."

"Heh-heh! He's sad, all right, and he doesn't even know it… It's downright adorable."

Veltol had altogether missed the meaning of what Theresia and Carol were saying. His wife alone seemed to be enraptured by him just the same;

Wilhelm put a hand to his forehead when he noticed it.

The dynamics of this family were unusual to say the least. And now he was a part of it. He thought back to his own family, to his parents and his two older brothers—had it been this exhausting to deal with them?

If it had been, he was suddenly less perplexed as to why he had left home.

"I remember getting upset at my brothers' excuses, but…"

As Wilhelm sat reflecting, Theresia called on him for reinforcement.

"Hey, Wilhelm! You tell my father! This isn't normal, is it? You have to tell him… He doesn't understand anything even when people spell it out for him!"

"Well then, my saying anything won't do any good, right?"

"But it'll make me happy to know you're on my side! Isn't that reason enough?"

She hardly seemed to understand the full power of that last argument. Leave it to the Sword Saint to intuitively grasp her opponent's most vulnerable point.

"——? What are you grinning for? Here, come over here. I need an ally." She gestured at him to join her.

"Yeah, I know," Wilhelm said, still grinning. "So what are you arguing about this morning?" He still didn't really know. The number of visits they had been subjected to during their first half-moon as husband and wife couldn't be the entire explanation.

At last, Theresia, her face bright red, divulged the outrageous request Veltol had made this time. "My father—he says he wants to accompany us on our honeymoon! Can you even believe that? Wilhelm, help me convince him he's mad!"

Now I get it.

Wilhelm looked at the ceiling. This was even worse than he'd thought.

3

"Well, Father. Explain your thought process. Then I'll decide how I feel."

"Ha-ha-ha… 'Decide how you feel' sounds so intimidating, Theresia. What a child, putting her father to the test. Every time I think I can take my eyes off you…"

"This isn't helping your case, Father."

“Whaaat?! Why?! We haven’t even talked about anything yet!”

Veltol was overwhelmed by Theresia’s piercing glare. Wilhelm frowned, curious why the man was at all surprised, but the three women remained expressionless, perhaps already used to this. Still, they were bound for a mere repeat of the earlier argument at this rate. Though he didn’t much want to, Wilhelm found he had no choice but to intervene.

“Calm down, Theresia,” he said. “Let’s hear him out first. And you, Father, please don’t surprise Theresia like that. Her emotions burst out at a moment’s notice.”

“Hrm… Yes, very well. If you say so, Wilhelm, I’ll listen.” Theresia puffed out her cheeks sulkily but nonetheless came around.

Veltol, relieved, stroked his beard, a wisp of a smile on his face. “You almost act as if you understand Theresia better than I do, young Wilhelm. I’ll have you know, I’ve bathed with Theresia.”

“Father!! Just how far back do you intend to go to nurse this hostility of yours?!”

“I hate to break it to you, but so have I.”

“Hagghh!”

“W-Wilhelm?!”

Veltol choked, and Theresia, her face red as could be, grabbed Wilhelm by the lapels and shoved him over to a corner of the room. There, she pinned her husband up against the wall, her face running with tears of embarrassment and panic and love.

“Wh-wh-what do you think you’re saying?! W-we haven’t been in the bath together yet!”

“Sorry. Rivalry got the better of me.”

“Don’t try to compete with my father! I do not, under any circumstances, want to see that same look in your eyes that he gets!”

It seemed like an implicitly terrible way of talking about her father, but Wilhelm couldn’t help agreeing with her. The bond between husband and wife was strengthened by the presence of a common enemy, and Wilhelm embraced Theresia gently before they went back to the sofa. Then they sat down again politely, but…

“…Carol, what are you doing over there?” Theresia asked. For some reason, Carol was sitting opposite Theresia and Wilhelm—that is, alongside Veltol and Tishua. She had been standing guard just behind Theresia until a

moment earlier. It seemed to literally indicate where she stood in this argument.

Carol, looking very serious indeed, shook her head and said, “That awful man has abused your relationship as husband and wife to bring shame upon you, Lady Theresia…”

“Wait! B-but Wilhelm and I are married, remember?”

“Yes. But I cannot abide the abuse of a husband’s authority to get into the bath with you.”

“Even though we’re married?!”

Carol was looking at Wilhelm with all the malice of a woman taking revenge for her dead parents. Veltol was quick to add, “She’s right, you know,” further cementing their alliance. Apparently, the other side had also discovered a common enemy, and it had reinforced their own connection. Well now, this was troublesome.

“I’m very sorry, Lady Theresia. But there are things on which I simply cannot budge. Even if it forces me to align myself with Lord Veltol.”

“Yes, she’s— What?! Forces you?!”

“B-but if even you say so, Carol, then what am I to do…?”

“I don’t care what you all think. I’m going to bathe with Theresia.”

“Curse youuuuu!” Carol flew at Wilhelm in genuine rage, but he easily deflected her attack. Ignoring the brewing knockdown, drag-out fight despite the difference in the abilities of the combatants, Theresia turned a worried look to Tishua for help.

“Mother…”

“Heavens, you’re a bride yourself now; don’t look so pathetic. Though I admit, I do feel a bit bad for you. Dear…?”

“Hrk! I swear, this isn’t my fault!” Head in hands, Veltol said precisely what the person at fault always says. The sight of her mother squinting silently at her trembling father was a familiar one to Theresia. And it followed a familiar course as well, to a familiar conclusion.

“I—I have to admit that attempting to follow you on your honeymoon was going a bit far even for me… Even if you weren’t so angry, Theresia, I certainly wouldn’t…”

“You heard him. He may be small-minded and have poor social skills, but he’s not a bad person—he just makes a little mischief. There’s nothing for you to worry over.”

“Mother, you could practice a little more restraint when talking about Father…”

“If I used restraint, it wouldn’t be a proper apology to you and your dear Wilhelm. That’s why I have to be thoroughly cruel. Oh, how it hurts…”

Tishua offered a hideously alluring smile as she continued to mock Veltol, who seemed to shrink under the attack. Theresia sympathized with her deflating father, but still let out a breath of relief. As much as she wanted to show filial devotion, even she couldn’t abide the idea of having her father on her honeymoon. Although she might be willing to let Carol come along as a chaperone.

“I wish the two of *you* would stop fighting already, too,” Theresia said.

“Who’s fighting?” Wilhelm asked. “She just won’t leave me alone.”

“Hrk… Why must I lack strength? O Sword God, if you hear the prayers of mortals, give me the power to strike this man down here and now—”

“Here?! Don’t ask that trickster for such a thing! Stop it, Carol!” Theresia hugged Carol, whose teeth were gritted, and patted her head gently. Her attendant experienced emotions deeply and had picked up on her mistress’s anger. “And, Wilhelm,” Theresia said, puffing out her cheeks, “don’t provoke her anymore. Next time, I’ll be the one to fight you.”

Wilhelm was quick to raise the white flag. “…Well, I won’t win that. I’ll stop.”

Thus, the argument about their honeymoon that had been raging all morning finally came to an end.

Although one suspected it would have gone much easier if Veltol had simply behaved like an adult.

“In any event, your first trip together is a bit like moving into the same house: It’s another marker of your new life as husband and wife,” Veltol said. “Take care that nothing untoward happens, that Theresia isn’t harmed. You understand?”

“Yeah, sure… I mean, yes, sir.”

“And, Theresia, if you ever have any complaint, you can come back to your family’s house any— Ouch! Ow, ow, ow!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho. Well then, Theresia, Wilhelm. Enjoy your trip together.” Tishua managed to grab Veltol’s ear before he could say anything truly out of line and dragged him out of the room. The fact that, despite being present in the house for roughly half the month, they had never tried to stay the night,

perhaps spoke to Veltol's better nature.

"I hope I'm not just imagining it," Carol muttered.

"I try not to think about it too much," Theresia said. "And what about you, Carol? You're off today, aren't you?"

Carol caught her breath slightly at this. As Theresia's attendant, she didn't have much concept of a fixed day off. Instead, these "vacation days" generally meant the days when the person with whom she could spend some relaxing time was also on vacation.

"The squad's off today, too," Wilhelm said. "Grimm's got to be hanging around at the garrison. Go on over there."

"I d-don't need you to tell me! That's what I was planning to do!"

"Yes, of course, that's wonderful," Theresia said. "Come on, time's wasting. This is your last day off before the trip—go have enough fun that you can stand to be with us after this."

"V-very well… If you say so, Lady Theresia."

The touch of obstinance was so maidenly, Theresia couldn't help but smile as she saw Carol off. Carol kept glancing at her as if there was something she wanted to say, all the way until she was gone, but perhaps realizing that nothing she might say to another girl in love would be any use, she shuffled out of the house.

"Maybe she has a date with Grimm at the shopping district," Theresia said. "I think Carol has been so cute lately. I'm nearly jealous of Grimm!"

Wilhelm clicked his tongue. "Both of them are a pain in the neck. They should hurry up and get together."

"Why? So she'll start paying more attention to him than to us? I would be a little bit sad if that happened…" Theresia smiled and ran a hand through her hair. She understood what Wilhelm was thinking, but the relationship between her and Carol was somewhat complex. The Remendes family, while not as prominent as the Astreas, was nonetheless nobility. As the eldest daughter of that household, it would be no simple matter for Carol to marry a commoner like Grimm. Even if their hearts were in perfect accord, status and blood still stood between them.

Wilhelm sensed Theresia's doubt. "Grimm just has to become a knight," he said. "He's Zergev Squadron's vice-captain. It won't be that long." He put a hand on her shoulder.

"…Mm," Theresia answered, leaning into his warmth and closing her

eyes. “You’re right.”

It was a series of miracles that had produced the union between her and Wilhelm. If even one thing had gone differently, this happiness might never have existed. At that moment, she knew only heartfelt gratitude. The love of him filled her; she looked up at Wilhelm.

“…S-say, Wilhelm?”

“Yeah, what?”

“You’re off today, too, aren’t you? No plans all day?”

Theresia didn’t quite seem to know where to put her eyes. Wilhelm frowned. He didn’t fully grasp what her question was driving at, but he dipped his head affirmatively.

“Yeah. What about it?”

“…I know it’s still morning, but Carol’s left, and… Er, sh-shall I draw a bath?” Theresia could feel the heat rising in her cheeks; she had to scrounge up her courage to speak. It might seem irreverent to compare this to the fields of battle on which she had stood as the Sword Saint, but she felt this made her even more nervous. It was its own trial.

“____”

Wilhelm’s blue eyes opened wide in astonishment. She saw her own face reflected in them and thought how pitiful and shameful she looked there.

For a moment, she thought she might die of embarrassment, but—

Well, let us simply say that on that day, they tried something new as husband and wife.

4

When it came to Wilhelm and Theresia’s honeymoon, there were a number of logistical challenges to overcome.

For example, Wilhelm’s Zergev Squadron had a very important place in the reorganized royal army, reporting directly to the king. A great deal was expected of them. With the effects of the civil war very much to be felt both inside and outside the country, there was considerable concern about the captain of this unit vacating the capital.

It would in fact be difficult to refuse if he were asked to put off his trip on those grounds. However—

“No, the Sword Saint and the Sword Devil have at last been wed. I should think the Dragon itself would get angry at us if we were to interfere with the venerable rite of passage that is a honeymoon. I say they go!”

Such concerns were swept aside by the declaration of His Majesty Jionis. The king was as agreeable and as sympathetic as ever, qualities for which Wilhelm was deeply grateful. It almost made offering him one’s sword feel like an empty gesture.

Thus, having promised His Majesty both souvenirs and stories, Wilhelm managed to secure a chance to go on his honeymoon.

The husband’s schedule was therefore settled. The next problem was his wife.

Theresia retained the blessing of the Sword Saint, but she had already been released from service in the royal army and resumed being just another daughter of the nobility—and a housewife, at that. What problem could she have? The Sword Saint’s fame.

“If they learn who you are, Lady Theresia, whole cities will be in an uproar. I’m sure you don’t want that, either. So we must use the utmost caution.” Carol would be accompanying them on their trip, and she was burning with enthusiasm to fulfill her role as Theresia’s attendant for the first time in quite a while.

Theresia was somewhat cowed by her intensity. “U-uh, Carol? Maybe you could stop to take a breath?”

“To have the chance to present you precisely as I see fit—what joy that I was born your attendant…! At the wedding ceremony I tried to make you beautiful, yes, but now I shall pour my whole heart and soul into making you as lovely as can be, Lady Theresia! Prepare yourself!”

“Oh, uhh…”

With Theresia as a blank canvas, Carol proved herself a surprisingly gifted artist. Much as the knight hated to dress up herself, she leaped at the chance to coordinate an outfit for Theresia.

Ultimately, the ensemble de-emphasized Theresia’s unique attractiveness, while making her seem even sweeter and more noble than usual—the effect was practically magical.

“My greatest regret is that now I must give you over to that man…!”

“Oh, take it easy… You won’t fight too much with Wilhelm during the trip, will you?” Theresia smiled wanly, admiring herself in the mirror. The

effect of her distinctive red hair was somewhat blunted by a wide-brimmed white hat, while a long dress with an elaborately embroidered skirt was meant to draw the eye. So long as she didn't carry around the Dragon Sword, no one would suspect her of being the Sword Saint.

"That's my Carol. I love it."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now let's get ready for the—"

"Wait. It would be unfair if we didn't dress you up, too, Carol."

"Er."

Carol froze when she saw the smile on Theresia's face. She backed away step by step, but Theresia trapped her against the wall, looking like a delicate noblewoman the whole time. Then Theresia opened her arms—there was no chance of escape—and said, "Come on, you can be a girl just like me! You can't leave me to be embarrassed all by myself."

"P-please, forgive me, Lady Theresia! You can dress up a rough-hewn woman like me, but it won't—"

"Don't be silly! Here, come on, come on, come on, come on!"

"Oh! Ohh nooo…"

And with that amusing interlude, both husband and wife were finally ready for their honeymoon.

5

The two of them had been granted a generous two months for their honeymoon. They'd heard that this, too, had something to do with the good offices of His Majesty Jionis, but the more they thanked him, the more generous he became, so afraid of being granted even more, they determined to leave the remainder of their gratitude for after the trip.

"Even so, it's still not enough time for a full tour of the kingdom…"

"There's nothing to the north or east anyway," Wilhelm said. "We can skip those."

"But aren't the Trias lands to the north?"

"…Seriously, let's go somewhere else this time. What good would it do them for us to go there on our honeymoon?"

Theresia was suggesting that they include the Trias lands—or rather, the former Trias lands, the family having been obliterated—on their trip, but Wilhelm refused. Even though it was indeed the place where his family and

all his ancestors slept, he had already been to pay his respects once before their marriage. Even the dead could be inconvenienced by too-frequent visits.

"Well, okay. I'll listen to you… So do we want to do the west or the south, then?"

"If we go west, we'll be at the cities of the locks. South is the land dragon capital and the merchant cities. Take your pick."

"Hmm. Hmmm. Hmmmmmmm…!"

Left to decide for herself, Theresia mulled and agonized, but then her blue eyes went wide, flashing.

"For our very first trip, we'll go south!"

Husband and wife left the capital in a dragon carriage, heading first for Flanders. Flanders was a city on the Highclara Plateau, where a variety of land dragons lived; the area was known for raising these creatures. Land dragons from Flanders were valued both abroad as well as within Lugunica, and its "dragon industry" had elevated it to one of the kingdom's five largest cities.

"According to legend, Flanders is also where the Holy Dragon Volcanica was bound in friendship to the first Sword Saint, Reid, and the sage Shaura," Theresia said.

"Yeah, I think I've heard that the first land dragons were born as some kind of blessing from the Holy Dragon about the same time. Not that I believe it for a second."

"But if it were true, wouldn't that be exciting?" Theresia's eyes were shining.

Wilhelm gave a sort-of smile, holding back the rush of emotion in his heart.

When the three of them arrived in Flanders, they were greeted by a scene worthy of the city's nickname, the Land Dragon Capital. Wherever they went in the great city, they found a place predicated on the existence of land dragons, with much power for urban functions provided by the creatures. As a simple example, sometimes they would see a land dragon running on a gigantic wheel. The motion would open or close a canal or raise or lower a

drawbridge.

"Lately, magic lanterns powered by mana crystals have started showing up in the capital, but…"

"Here you don't see anything like that, huh?" Wilhelm concluded. "But on the other hand, we don't have these wheels where we come from."

"In the capital, land dragons are mostly for transporting cargo or passengers," Carol broke in. "We don't have enough of them to spare any for generating power like this. The geography of the capital isn't really suited to this sort of thing, either. I guess you could call it a unique feature of this area… What?"

She cast a dubious eye at Wilhelm, who shrugged. "Nothing. I was just surprised to hear such a perceptive explanation from you. I didn't know you knew so much."

"I can't say it feels quite natural, hearing honest praise from you… Anyway, it's just something I picked up."

"From Grimm?" Theresia asked.

Carol's frown was answer enough.

They were to stay in Flanders for ten days, and the three of them took it nice and slow during that time.

The ones who enjoyed it most, however, were Theresia and Carol, while Wilhelm, less amenable to the appreciation of scenery, mostly followed the women around. Consider:

"Hey, Wilhelm! Look! What a gorgeous view!"

They were flying over the plateau on a land dragon, Theresia pointing and grinning at the sun setting between the mountains. Even if the scenery hadn't been so captivating, he would still have been completely taken by Theresia's ear-to-ear smile. It would have been enough for him, riding alongside her on another dragon, to keep watching that smile out of the corner of his eye.

Wilhelm, too, started to grin, feeling a sense of satisfaction about this trip.

Not everything about the honeymoon was so pleasing. For example, there was the matter of room assignments.

"I mean, I can understand getting two rooms at the inn, but what's with the two of you staying in one of them and me in the other? This is supposed to be my and Theresia's trip."

“Curse you—what are you playing at, trying to share a bed with Lady Theresia…?”

“Just so you know, that’s what we do every night back home. It’s a little late to be worrying about it now.”

“Why, youuu—!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! I forbid you from fighting! *For! Bid! You!* Wilhelm, stop provoking Carol! Or I really won’t share a bed with you again!”

Thus, they passed the time in Flanders until it was time to point their dragon carriage toward their next destination, the city of Pictat. Along the way…

“Hey, the Astrea family’s main house is near Flanders…”

“No.”

“I think maybe your mom and dad are back home by now…”

“No.”

And so it was agreed that they would not be making any detours.

They politely ignored the existence of the Astrea house, which was somewhat out of the way anyway, and headed for Pictat, a place known for its picturesque vistas—and, unbeknownst to them, the stage for the next act of their story.

6

Pictat was another of Lugunica’s five great cities, a place that flourished thanks to its trade with other nations. The city was divided into five districts—one for each cardinal direction and a central district—and each had its own special trade and unique rules. It seemed as if each of the districts was a city or indeed a land unto itself.

The central district was especially rich and particularly crowded with facilities aimed at visitors. As tradition all but dictated, Wilhelm and his party stayed at an inn there, but…

“Stupid, stupid Father! I give up!”

A beautiful voice rang through the inn early one morning, scaring the birds in the garden into flight. As the sound of startled wings receded, the world settled into a moment of silence. But the frozen moment swiftly melted away,

and a tall, thin, bearded man launched into action.

Or we could say simply: Veltol.

"W-wait, Theresia. Surely there is no reason to be so upset. I should imagine one would be surprised and overjoyed to encounter one's father so unexpectedly…"

"Why must you always be this way, Father?! Just when I thought that for once you might finally be sensible! You betrayed me… You're the worst! The worst, the worst, the worst!"

"Whaaaaaat?! Bad enough for you to be that tearful?!"

At the entrance to what was reputed to be the finest hotel in the city's central district, the Golden Cup, Theresia and Veltol were having their first argument in nearly half a month. Veltol was squealing under Theresia's aggression. Carol, supporting her agitated mistress, shot him a glance.

"So you circled ahead of your daughter to head off her honeymoon… Lord Veltol, I must question your judgment."

"You too, Carol?! Are you sure those tears aren't from the heartwarming joy of meeting one's family on the road?!"

"No—of course not—how could they be?! Did Mother allow this?!"

"Er, Tishua was against it, but…I thought perhaps it was a test…"

"Oh, it's a test, all right. A test of my patience! By *you*, Father!"

From the look of the wilting Veltol, it seemed Tishua was not with him this time. Theresia had never seen him act on his own before, and the fact that he didn't have his wife to keep him in check left her more anxious than ever about what he might do.

"Calm down, Theresia," Wilhelm said. "The fact is he's here now, and we can't change that. It's not like he's going to come to our room with us. I'm sure your father's done what he came to do."

"Er… I did take a room here, you kn—"

"I'm sure he's done what he came to do." Wilhelm stared Veltol square in the face, silencing him by sheer spirit.

The head of the family of the Sword Saints was able to endure that glare for an instant or so, but then his face went pale and he shook his head. It wasn't the most respectful way to treat his father-in-law, but if there was ever a time for Wilhelm to take the side of his wife, this was it.

"*Sigh*… Father, what did you tell Mother when you came here?"

"I told her I had official business to attend to. I had ordered something

from one of the merchant houses in the western part of town and recently received word that it arrived. I came to get it… That was my true purpose."

"So you just thought you would bother me and Wilhelm on your way through…?"

"Are you still going to get angry even though I've told you the truth? What do you want me to do?! Do you want me to apologize?!"

Yes, an apology might help, but Veltol's pride got in the way, and he found he couldn't.

Faced with a father and daughter who seemed about to descend back into argument, Wilhelm and Carol nodded at each other. Then Wilhelm grabbed Theresia, Carol grabbed Veltol, and they dragged the two apart.

"W-W-Wilhelm," Theresia sputtered.

"I know," he said. "But just calm down." He looked into Theresia's eyes, which glistened with tears of frustration. "Calm down. Don't get emotional."

"But this time— It's just…"

"If you can't bear it, let me get angry in your place. And don't let anyone but me see you looking like this. I'm the only one you have to get emotional for."

"You're so selfish… Ohhh. Er, that is, I mean…"

They were so close they could feel each other's breath. The anger that had so gripped Theresia until a moment earlier drained away. Her face was still red, but now it was from embarrassment rather than rage.

Wilhelm relaxed when he saw this and turned to the other perpetrator of the argument. Carol had already procured Veltol's acquiescence with a threat to tell Tishua. Wilhelm wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Now that you've come around, Lord Veltol," Carol said, "we'll be saying our farewells…"

"Wait, wait, wait, Carol! Surely you're in too much of a rush to send me home! I *do* have business to attend to here. Inserting myself into Theresia's vacation wasn't my only objective!"

"Be careful what you say, sir," Wilhelm warned him. "I'm going to get tired of talking Theresia down one of these days." It was clearly only a matter of time before Theresia exploded again when Veltol laid bare his intentions like this. The best plan would clearly be for him to run his errand as fast as he could and then go home.

"…And so what exactly did you want here, Father?"

“Th-there’s such an edge in your voice… Er, but, yes.” Even as he backed away from his daughter’s narrowing gaze, Veltol stroked his beard. Then he looked down, almost shyly. “It’s a hair ornament for Tishua. It will be our anniversary soon, you see.”

7

“Every year, Father gives Mother a new hair ornament. And on important days, Mother wears the hair ornament he got her that year… It’s the one thing he does that I think is really wonderful.” Theresia glanced up at Wilhelm, smiling bashfully. The smile was a subtle indication that she wanted Wilhelm to learn something from what she was saying, but it equally implied that everything else her father did was not to be emulated.

Having said that, since Veltol actually had a perfectly respectable reason for being in town, there was no call to stop him from going to pick up the gift. It was a simple matter of going to the western district and collecting the item from a merchant there. Even Veltol couldn’t cause too much trouble doing that.

“So tell me again why we have to go with him?”

“We don’t have a choice. Lord Veltol requested that Lady Theresia accompany him. If we turn down this simple request, we might end up stuck with him for the remainder of our trip.”

“You talk awfully freely about your employer…”

Wilhelm frowned as he and Carol walked down the main street side by side. This situation was as unusual on this trip as it was at any other time. But they had ended up together because father and daughter were walking ahead of them, happily, arm in arm. This wasn’t even at Veltol’s request but had come about naturally.

“That Theresia… For all she complains, she’s really her daddy’s pet.”

“Stop that. You make her sound like a small animal. Anyway, their affection for each other is plain to see. Lady Theresia, in particular, is the apple of Lord Veltol’s eye. In fact, his eyes became an issue once.”

“Well, the result is clear to see.”

He was glad that Theresia’s blessing of the reaper had ceased to function. If her father had lost his sight because of that, Theresia would have regretted it forever.

With these feelings in mind, Wilhelm felt his eyes soften while watching the two people walking ahead of him. Veltol's voice sounded authoritative, if nothing else about him did, while Theresia could go directly from pouty puffed cheeks to a smile like a flower.

"…You look a bit soft for the Sword Devil."

"There are times when I don't need to be the Sword Devil. And anyway, I never thought I would see Theresia and her father having a real conversation."

"You…might be right about that."

In spite of her usual tendency to argue, today, for once, Carol agreed with Wilhelm. In any event, the familial connection between Theresia and Veltol seemed to have been restored. Or perhaps it had never really been broken.

With no more need to keep a watchful eye on his wife and her father, Wilhelm took an interested look around the city with all the unusual sights it offered. At first, it seemed much like the shopping district in the capital, but it was far busier, since the capital's commercial life had been stifled by the civil war.

Shops and stalls lined the street, and the boisterous voices were evidence of the overwhelming vigor and life of the place. The exhaustion of the drawn-out war seemed not to have touched this city.

"Noisy place," Wilhelm remarked.

"Not to your liking?" Carol replied seriously. "Regardless, this is a concrete example of what Lady Theresia fought to protect."

What she said was true. If the brutal hand of the Demi-human War had reached this place, who knew what might have become of this liveliness?

"She always blames herself," Wilhelm said.

"To her, the gazes of the voiceless departed are much heavier than the sound of those who were saved. I hate to say it, but…you're the only one who can alleviate that pain."

"____"

"I can see that all too clearly now. This trip is something of a line in the sand for me, as well."

"What kind of line?"

"…When we get back to the capital, you'll see." Carol wouldn't meet his eyes, her face remaining its usual impenetrable mask. She maintained an armor that hid her emotions from him, no matter how he might seek them out.

When we get back to the capital, you'll see. She was stubborn, but he believed her. Wilhelm had faith in her.

The party passed most of an hour walking around, notwithstanding the unusual conversation.

Veltol finally stopped at a shop just inside the entrance to the western district.

"This is where I ordered it."

Wilhelm looked up, taking the place in. It was relatively large and handled everything from textiles to foodstuffs. Carol had told him that, in Pictat, the variety of items an establishment could sell was a quick measure of its status. It followed that this shop would be prominent even in the capital.

"Swain Goods…"

"A very clever merchant house," Veltol said. "I first encountered them years ago, when I came here to talk business. Ever since then, I've always consulted them when choosing gifts for Tishua."

"I've heard of them, but I've never been here," Theresia said. "You're always coming here on the sly, Father." She almost sounded teasing.

Veltol responded with no hint of embarrassment. "A man ought to pick out gifts by himself. It's one of the best ways to show how you care for a person." Theresia looked surprised for a moment, then quickly looked at the ground as if ashamed of herself. The sight of her father proudly giving his love for his wife a concrete form was striking. She thought perhaps the relationship between Veltol and Tishua was something different from what she had always believed.

Quite oblivious to the way his daughter, now a wife herself, was watching him, Veltol spoke to a young staff member standing outside the shop. "Is Yactol Swain in? It's Veltol Astrea; I have an appointment."

In response to the appearance of this familiar customer, the staff member said, "Just a moment, please, sir," and hurried into the shop.

While they waited, Veltol turned to Wilhelm. "I must apologize, young Wilhelm," he said, "but I'm about to pick out a gift for my wife… Perhaps I could ask you and Carol to wait out here. Not that I'm embarrassed, mind you."

Wilhelm raised an eyebrow. "I don't mind," he said, "but what about Theresia?"

“I’d like her to choose the hair ornament with me. Please indulge me in this.”

Wilhelm felt this didn’t quite square with Veltol’s prior announcement that a man should choose his own gifts.

“Th-that’s fine by me!” Theresia said. “L-listen, Wilhelm, just spend a bit of time with Carol. I mean, this will probably be the last chance you get to walk around with a girl other than me…”

“That’s not a chance I need or want.”

“Oh, hush up and come with me! Lady Theresia, Lord Veltol! We shall see you in a short while. We will meet you back at this store—later!”

Then Carol dragged Wilhelm off all but kicking and screaming. He meant to resist her, but the effort went out of him when he saw Theresia smile and wave at him.

Fine, then. He would consider this the last obdurate request of his bride’s father and let it go.

“Seriously, though, this is the last time…”

“Every time you encounter Lord Veltol, you have to play along with him…telling yourself all the while that this is the last time. Remember it well.”

It was not a lesson Wilhelm wanted to learn, but he let Carol drag him away from the shop just the same.

He took one last glance toward the shop where Theresia and Veltol stood. Theresia kept waving until he was out of sight.

Wilhelm would regret their parting in this place for a long time to come.

8

Carol took the stone-faced Wilhelm by the arm and dragged him off into the crowd of people.

“Theresia, how has the trip been so far?” Veltol asked, as if he had been waiting for this moment.

Theresia tapped a finger to her lips. “It’s really been a lot of fun. Just like I imagined…or maybe even better.”

“A trip of more than a month can allow you to see things you don’t see in everyday life. Young Wilhelm may be able to behave himself at home, but

how has he been on this trip? He hasn't made eyes at the girls in the places you've visited, or been condescending to shop staff, or tried to make you leave a place when you're having fun, or—"

"It's all right, Father."

"But…"

"Father." Theresia's voice was gentle. Her eyes were as blue as a clear lake, and Veltol went silent, as though even he knew that now was the moment to stop talking. He was not quick to grasp a situation, or intuit anything, or guess how people were feeling—but Veltol was nonetheless his daughter's father. His daughter's feelings, at least, he apprehended.

"You're right. I've seen a lot of sides of Wilhelm that I don't normally see. You needn't worry about him looking at other women or acting bored in a place he isn't interested in. Although the fact that he can't seem to express himself or be earnestly kind… Well, I'd like to work on that." Theresia giggled as she bent her fingers, counting off the memories they'd made on this vacation. "But I have seen a good deal of him that I normally wouldn't, and it's made me love him more than ever. I'm so glad it was him. I can accept it all *because* it was him."

"___"

"Father, I'm in love. I love Wilhelm. Everything about him makes my heart burst with joy. I'm truly happy. "So…," she murmured, looking at her silent, tense-eyed father, "thank you for being so concerned about me my whole life."

Smiling, Theresia communicated to him this tremendous blessing she had found, with all the gratitude and love she could muster.

Veltol swallowed a breath to see his beloved daughter like this. Then he put a hand to his mouth and said, "I-if you truly are happy, then that…that alone is enough for me."

"Yes."

"You are the child of me and Tishua. The sister of Thames, Carlan, and Cajiress. I have a responsibility to see that you're happy. Can…?"

"Yes?"

"Can he do that…?"

"Yes," Theresia answered after a beat, responding to her father's trembling question with love and only love.

Finally, the dam of Veltol's emotions broke. He moved his hand from his

mouth to his eyes and began weeping great, fat tears.

A middle-aged man standing and crying right in the middle of such a well-traveled street was bound to attract some attention. Theresia, however, felt no shame but drew close to her father, gently offering him a handkerchief.

"If you're happy, that's all that matters. I'm glad this trip made that clear. *Snorf!*"

"Of course, Father. Thank you." Theresia nodded deeply, ignoring the honking sound of her father blowing his nose.

The people around them, when they saw Veltol had finished crying, soon lost interest. Theresia smiled wryly at having become, for a moment, a tourist attraction in this city of tourist attractions, then she turned back to the store—

"Oh, I'm sorry we kept you waiting. You're from this shop, right?"

"Er? Oh, ahem, yes. Er, I am Yactol Swain, the spokesman for this merchant. It's my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The speaker bowed to Theresia. He was a man with a narrow face and gray hair, and he seemed a bit older than she was. The fact that he ran a shop at his age surprised her. As well as the fact that he was evidently close with her father.

"Yactol," Veltol said. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

"Not at all, sir, you've nothing to be ashamed of. I assure you, I'm well aware how the eyes may brim in an emotional conversation between parent and child." He took a breath. "If anything, it is I who have reason for regret." The young man—Yactol—bowed again.

"Regret?" Theresia asked uncertainly.

The answer, however, soon revealed itself in the flesh.

"You spend too long in vain chatter. I insist my precious time not be wasted with fools."

An imperious voice came from inside the store, drawing Theresia's attention. Down an aisle between the shelves was a door leading to the innermost part of the shop, and the speaker stood directly in front of it.

He was slim with uncommonly noble features. Perhaps around thirty years old with rich, deep purple hair. His clothes and carriage marked him out immediately as a person of status—but not one from this kingdom.

"L-Lord Stride!" Yactol exclaimed. "Sir, I must request you wait inside…"

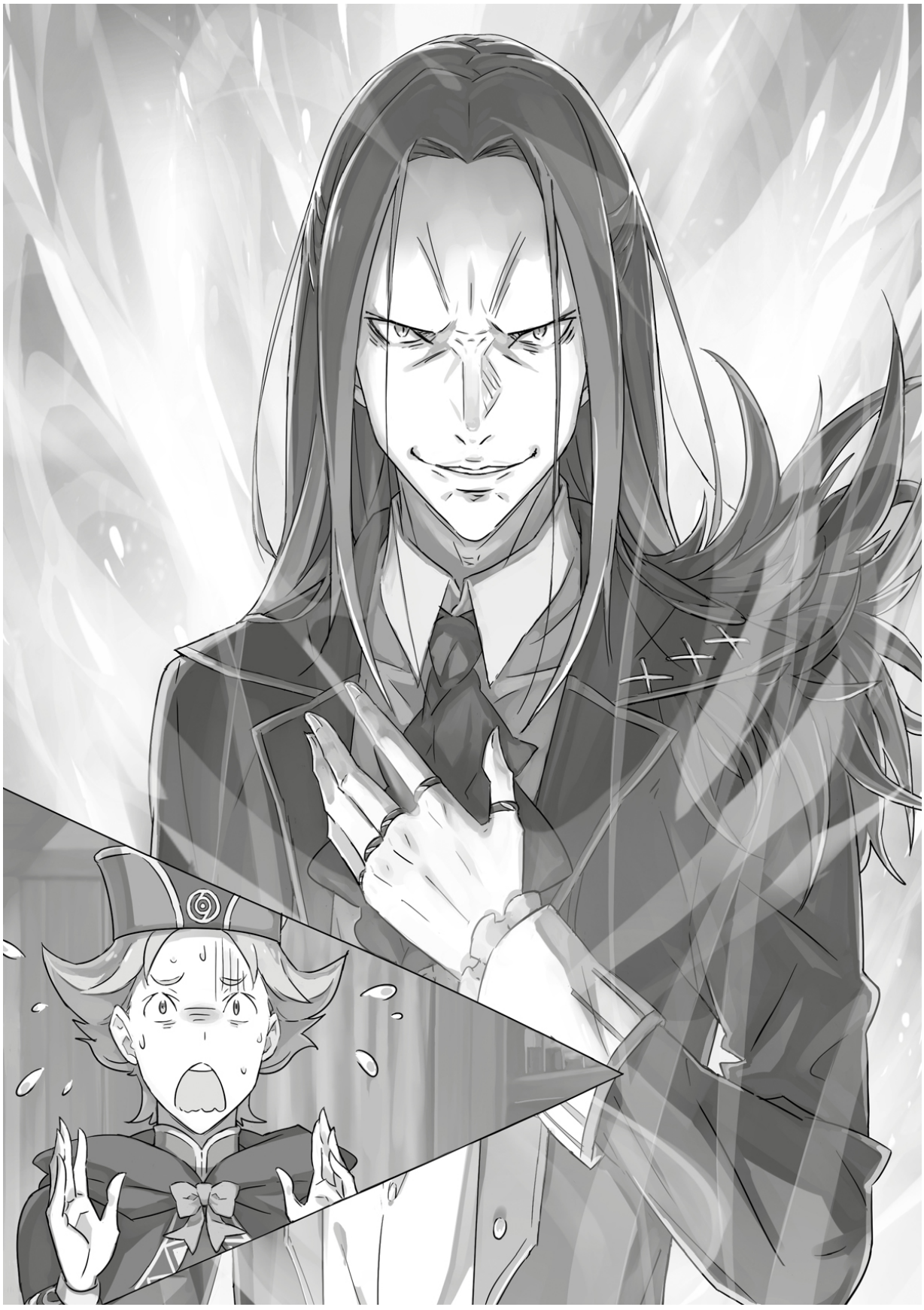
"Fool and boor. Why should my actions be in any way constrained by a

despicable merchant such as yourself? If you cannot rein in your impertinence, then your one redeeming feature—your discerning eye—shall go for naught."

The man called Stride turned a baleful eye on Yactol. He was not speaking to Theresia, yet she felt a chill run down her spine just the same.

She understood: There was no lie in Stride's words. This was not mere intimidation. If this man didn't like someone, he would feel no compunction about tearing out an eye or two.

Veltol stepped forward to speak for the paralyzed Yactol. "…I can't say that's a very gentlemanly attitude. What is it you want here?" There was no trace of the sobbing, sniffling man who had stood there a few minutes before. Now he radiated the authority of the head of the House of Astrea, the bloodline of the Sword Saints.



Stride raised an impressed eyebrow at Veltol's display. "Hmm. For one who weeps like a woman, you do know how to present yourself."

"If you wish to stand there and slander me, then let me respond in kind. If you have some business, state it quickly. Else this may not end with words alone."

"With worse than words, eh? Splendid. That is precisely what I wish."

"What?"

Veltol was startled by the eager reaction to this dangerous exchange. Yactol, ghostly white and swallowing hard, said, "Lord Veltol…Lord Stride has shown an interest in the item I prepared for you, sir. Naturally, I refused and told him it already has a buyer, but he insisted on speaking to you personally…"

"And thus, I waited. I deigned to wait, as I was told you would come, but I never imagined you would start jabbering away just outside the store. A pathetic act that raises my hackles." Stride smiled coldly.

"Now just a minute, you," Theresia said angrily. She was upset at the way his words made light of the moment she had shared with her father. She couldn't stand by and hear this mockery of Veltol's clumsy but unmistakable love.

But then—

"…And what is this?" Stride asked, narrowing his eyes.

"In accordance with the customs of the Kingdom of Lugunica, I have challenged you to a duel, young wolf of the Empire."

Stride was looking at a white handkerchief at his feet. Veltol had thrown it at him; it had struck Stride in the chest before drifting to the ground. It was, just as Veltol said, an invitation to a duel.

"Father…!" Theresia swallowed, and Yactol somehow grew even paler than before. Veltol's brave expression, however, did not falter one bit, and neither did Stride's as he accepted the handkerchief.

"An insult once offered cannot be withdrawn," he said.

"I have no intention of withdrawing it," Veltol answered. "You have shamed my daughter, and what's more, you seek to steal away my gift for my wife, like a common thief. I declare that I cannot forgive these offenses."

"Ha!" Stride exclaimed. "Such words. You've done well even to speak such bold things to me!" Passion came into Stride's face. He stared straight at Veltol with respect in his eyes, his cold, indifferent expression gone.

“F-Father! You can’t! What do you hope to—?”

“Don’t try to stop me, Theresia. I am a member of Lugunica’s nobility. A man of the House of Astrea. I know a thing or two about the sword. And above all, I am a husband and a father.”

“—!”

Veltol gently rebuffed Theresia’s attempt to stop him; turning back was no longer an option. Faced with her father’s resolution and assurance, Theresia found she could offer no more words.

She turned her most intent gaze upon Stride. The way he stood would tell her just how capable he was. With the blessing of the Sword Saint that she had, Theresia could judge a person’s abilities at a glance. And her judgment showed her—

“Oh…”

“Turn not your impertinent eyes upon me, girl. Rudeness never does become a woman. But regardless, did your naughty little eyes see it? Did you see that I am not fit for any duel?”

“What is this…?”

Theresia could hardly get the words out. Stride gave a dry laugh. Then he spoke to Veltol, who was watching the exchange in puzzlement. “My body is racked with illness. Even moving is difficult for me, let alone sword fighting. A duel could only end in tragedy for me. Do you not agree?”

“That may be so, but…”

Stride declared openly what Theresia had seen with her eyes. What he said was true. Theresia had seen that Stride’s flesh and bones could not stand up to strong physical exertion.

So why had he accepted the challenge…?

“As such, I nominate a champion to take my place in the duel. In deference to your spirit.”

The moment Stride said *champion*, Theresia spun around.

“___”

Standing behind her was a figure she could never have imagined until that moment. It was giant. Nearly seven feet tall, so towering that she had to crane her neck to look up at it, so tall that it had to bend over to enter the store. The entire body was covered in a black robe, but Theresia could feel the threat rolling off it.

“My champion,” Stride said to Theresia, cruelly seeming to enjoy her

alarm. “I engaged him as a bodyguard, but he’s useful in situations such as this, as well.”

That was the moment the Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, encountered Kurgan, the eight-armed one.

These were the first sparks of the Silver Flower Dance of Pictat.

9

The moment she saw the man, an instinctive sense of danger gripped Theresia.

Even she, who had lived with the blessing of the Sword Saint her entire life, who had been subject to the whim of the Sword God, could not suppress a shudder.

Kurgan’s huge body was armored by thick, twisting muscles and draped in the black cloak. His face was hidden by a hood, but the most striking thing about this giant was his arms—eight of them, far more than any normal person.

She understood at a glance, as he stood there with four of his arms crossed, that this man was like something out of legend.

“Stride,” the man said. His voice rumbled as if a mountain were speaking. “You told me you were only here for business. What is going on?”

“You know how poor the blood flow is in my body, Kurgan,” Stride replied graciously. “Do you think I would excite myself unnecessarily? It was these rude creatures that started everything. It’s time for you to earn your keep as my guard.”

“Kurgan…?!” Theresia exclaimed.

The giant body with its imposing aura, the multitude of arms—all very well pointed to Kurgan of the many-armed tribe.

“Eight-Arms Kurgan of the Volakian Empire?!”

“Oh-ho. You not only saw me for what I was, but you know the name of Eight-Arms. I’m surprised…but perhaps I shouldn’t be. A closer look reveals something to you. You have my interest.”

“Contain yourself,” Kurgan said. “This girl is no rabbit you can catch.”

“Hmph. The man of malign blood is awfully quick to offer his opinion.”

The giant threw back his hood, revealing the face beneath—blue skin and

black eyes, the visage of a vengeful demon.

Then he looked into Theresia's blue eyes. "A creature of integrity, I see, and abilities unexpected. You— What is your name?"

"____"

Theresia hesitated at first to answer Kurgan's question.

It was clear who she was dealing with. "Eight-Arms" of the Volakian Empire was the nickname of a god of battle who sought the title of Strongest in the Empire. His feats were known throughout the Kingdom of Lugunica, the same way the Sword Saint, Theresia van Astrea, was famous in Volakia.

If she carelessly announced herself, this would transform into a meeting of the Sword Saint and Eight-Arms. And there was no telling where that would lead…

Her hesitation was resolved when Veltol stepped forward. "I cannot abide you turning your uncouth eyes upon my daughter. She is newly wed, and what you do is difficult to forgive. Further, this dispute is between me and him, and does not include any champion or anyone else."

Veltol stood with his beloved daughter behind him, covering her, attempting to fulfill his role as the challenger in the duel. Sensing the threat from him, Kurgan turned his eyes to Veltol.

"…Your audacity impresses. However, that man cannot serve as your opponent."

"Is it not to a swordsman's credit that he can evaluate an opponent and know when to draw and when to sheathe?"

"I see," Kurgan said, lowering his head in evident admiration at Veltol's forthright resolution. "This one was most rude. Forgive me, swordsman of the kingdom."

To see the Empire's strongest apologizing to Veltol left Theresia speechless. Completely forgetting where she was, she felt only pride in her father. He had no talent for swordsmanship, rarely showed anything approaching courage, and his thoughtless overprotectiveness had been the cause of more than one argument between them—but here was a shining light that eclipsed all that.

"Then let me ask, not instead but in addition—what do they call you?"

"…It's Veltol. O Eight-Arms Kurgan."

Veltol demurred to provide his family name, concealing his association with the Astreas and the Sword Saints. Clearly, he had the same doubts as his

daughter.

"Hmph." Stride snorted disinterestedly, looking at them. "Whoever you are, you are a nuisance. The pride of blood for blood… A fixation I myself do not understand. And here, your daughter is clearly so much more versed in the sword than you are."

"____"

"Or is it indeed true that she was allowed to abandon the blade? If so, then you are mad, and the king who approved such a thing an even more benighted ruler than I had heard."

"L-Lord Stride?! We-we're in Pictat, in the heart of the kingdom, sir!" Yactol found himself drawn into the debate as Stride loudly mocked first Veltol and then the Kingdom of Lugunica. He was white as a sheet at the thought that his store might become a battleground, and Stride laughed at the man.

"Do not measure the blood of the Bright Sword by the admonitions of fools, boor! Howsoever many may be the specks of dust beneath our feet, we do not fear for our place in the sun. A duel it shall be. A duel to settle all! A meeting between my champion, Eight-Arms, and this one who knows nothing of the blade but would stand in for the Sword Saint." He could no longer hide the malice in his words.

"—! You knew all along…" When it came clear that Stride had known that Theresia and Veltol were Astreas—indeed, that Theresia was the Sword Saint—everything fell into place.

It was nothing more and nothing less than the proof of the hatred of Stride, born of the Volakian Empire.

"Is your intent to damage relations between our countries?! Then this duel __"

"Is off? Then we claim victory. I certainly wouldn't mind at all. Veltol, shameless nobleman of Lugunica. Out of cowardice you have withdrawn from a challenge you yourself issued. Let shame be upon the name of your family and of your daughter's family. It befits you."

Stride was immensely fluent in his insults and his mockery of others. The coolness had returned to his expression, while Theresia's mind had gone blank in an avalanche of emotion. Did she have to endure this ridicule of her father, then simply swallow it and walk away?

But it seemed Veltol felt the same righteous indignation that Theresia did.

“Theresia, let me—”

“No…! You simply mustn’t, Father. Just endure it, please. Otherwise, you’ll be killed…”

Veltol valued his daughter’s honor more than the family name, more than even his own life. Theresia pulled on his sleeve, biting her pink lips and shaking her head vigorously.

Watching this debate between father and child, the battle god spoke somberly. “In battle, I shall give no quarter. This shall be my show of respect to you.”

This pose of respect between warriors was itself one more way of cornering them. If the threat of shame was the best way to cause indignation, Eight-Arms wouldn’t hesitate to break Veltol with it.

Theresia tried desperately to pull her dithering father away before that could happen, to cede this place to their opponents—

“Have you no impulse to take up the sword in place of your dishonored father?” Stride asked. “It seems the current Sword Saint wants for courage. Or perhaps your husband is quite talented to keep a woman like you in bed.”

“—!”

The next moment, a sharp sound rang around the street.

It was the sound of bone striking flesh, and Stride suddenly stumbled backward. The fist of a man with burning eyes had connected with his face—specifically, Veltol’s fist.

Her father had been mocked, her husband belittled, and Theresia had reached her breaking point. Veltol had acted and struck Stride before Theresia could do so.

And then, with Theresia looking on speechless, Veltol shouted, “Wilhelm is a man of the Astreas! I will not allow you to shame him!!”

“…That will do perfectly well as the start of a duel,” Stride murmured, blood dribbling from his torn lip.

The next instant, there was an explosion of fighting spirit from directly beside Veltol.

Splendid was the word of appreciation for his resolve—and soon after came a fist of iron.

“Tell Tishua…I’m sorry.”

“Wai—”

Theresia reached out her hand. For some reason she didn’t understand,

her father's voice sounded dreadfully calm.

10

By the time Wilhelm heard the commotion and came rushing back, it was all over.

"____"

When he wriggled through the wall of people, he saw blood, copious amounts of it. He could see immediately that someone had been seriously wounded.

He scanned the area but saw no trace of the people he was looking for. The beloved wife and quarrelsome father-in-law he had left here earlier were nowhere to be seen.

"Wilhelm! The hospital! Lady Theresia and Lord Veltol are—" Carol, her face dark, was talking to the owner of the store. They got the gist from him and rushed to the nearest hospital. When they arrived there, panting, they reached the waiting room to find—

"Oh…"

It was Theresia, dumbfounded, who watched them dash in. She didn't have any obvious wounds. But her light-pink outfit was splattered with blood. It looked as if she had hugged someone bleeding profusely.

"____"

Quicker than a word could be said, Wilhelm embraced the willowy girl. Theresia had been about to say something, but the strength of his arms made her catch her breath, and then she could hold back no longer. She broke into heaving sobs, tears spilling from her eyes.

"F-Father, he— Father… Wilhelm…!"

"Don't cry. It's all right," he said, stroking her head. Then he asked, "Where is your father?"

With a shaking finger, Theresia pointed inside.

"Let me handle this," Carol said, heading into the hospital. "You take care of Lady Theresia."

Wilhelm watched her go as he continued to comfort the howling Theresia and tried to get her to tell him what had happened.

"When we heard there was some kind of problem, we came back, but out in front of the store, there was blood everywhere, and you were here. I was

worried about your father but especially about you…”

“I’m…fine… But out in front of the store, we got into an argument with a man who said he was from the Empire… No, it was more than that. He had been hunting us from the start… But still, Father, he…”

“Hunting you…?”

“Father bore it all. He saw what they were after and knew he couldn’t let himself get dragged in… No matter how much they mocked him, he still… But when they made fun of you, Wilhelm…”

“___”

“Father—Father said you were a man of the Astreas…”

When Theresia, buried in his chest, told him this, Wilhelm was struck speechless. He felt his chest growing damp from his wife’s tears, and their heat fueled the growing fire in his heart. But before it could take full form—

“Lady Theresia, they’ve finished working on Lord Veltol. Come to his room.”

“—!”

When Carol spoke, Theresia’s head shot up. She began to totter unsteadily through the hospital, and Wilhelm made to follow her.

“Wilhelm,” Carol said, “I want to talk to you.”

“How is he?” Wilhelm asked pointedly.

“Not good,” Carol murmured, touching her golden hair. “The hospital has an excellent healer, so his life at least was saved…but his wounds aren’t the problem. It’s something else.”

“What is it?”

“His gate is seriously exhausted. Unnaturally so. I should think it’s—how do I say—a curse.”

The voice came from behind them, from a man who had just entered the waiting room. He was a thin man, older, at least a decade older than Wilhelm. From his white caster’s coat, it seemed likely that he was a healer.

“Who’re you?”

“Garitch. I’m a healer; I happened to be at the hospital today. But never mind me. What’s more important is this curse… If it isn’t broken, the patient’s life will be forfeited.”

“What exactly is this curse? Is it different from the healing arts or normal magic?”

“You could call it a twisted image of those things, or a perversion of

them. All curses have real killing power; their targets suffer and die. Curses are a favored tool of the wicked."

"___"

They had rarely heard the word *curse* before, but it proclaimed death for Veltol.

As he digested what the healer Garitch had told them, Wilhelm glanced toward the room where his father-in-law was sleeping. Even now, the man's life was in danger…

"We've got to find the imperial who did this."

"I f-f-finally found you… Y-you were just too fast, and I couldn't c-catch you…"

No sooner had Garitch finished explaining the situation than a young man, huffing and puffing, burst into the waiting room. Wilhelm looked over: It was the owner of the shop where the fight had occurred—in other words, an eyewitness who ought to be able to tell him what had happened to Theresia and Veltol.

"Phew… I have something to tell both—well, all—of you— Ergh, huh?!"

"Who did this, and where is he now? Spit it out. I dare you to try to hide anything."

"Wait, Wilhelm. He can't talk with you choking him. You're forgetting your own strength."

"Hold on already! I'm not trying to cover for anyone! I was just told to deliver a message! I've come to— P-put me down, will you?"

Wilhelm finally released the man he had grabbed by the collar and shoved up against the wall—Yactol.

The young man hid behind Garitch in an attempt to get away from Wilhelm and Carol.

"The one you're looking for—Lord Stride—he said he would be waiting tomorrow morning at the great bridge in the western quarter. He said he would bring the Scarlet Finger that's afflicting Lord Veltol…"

"The Scarlet Finger?! What's that?!"

"I don't know! That's just what I was told to tell you…"

The cringing Yactol really didn't appear to have any further information. Mulling over the news, Wilhelm turned to Garitch. The healer met his gaze and nodded. "The patient is in a precipitous decline. If the curse isn't broken by noon tomorrow, his life may be in danger."

“The sooner we break that curse the better, I assume,” Wilhelm said.

“Grr! Am I going to wait till tomorrow morning?!” Carol demanded. “I’m going to find those bastards today! Let’s go, shopkeep, you’re coming with!”

“What?! Why me?!”

Seeing that there was no time to waste, Carol grabbed Yactol and dragged him out of the hospital. Her directness was admirable, but their hopes of finding the ones they sought seemed thin. They were dealing with people who could target the Sword Saint, cast curses, and then specify a place and time to meet. If such people were hiding, it would be very difficult to discover them.

“Can I go in?” Wilhelm asked.

“That’s your wife with the patient now, isn’t it? You’re a responsible party, so let me tell you. Today, you should spend all the time with him you can.”

Despite his hoarse voice and diffident attitude, Garitch showed a flash of humanity. Wilhelm nodded, then finally went through the door into Veltol’s room.

The room was white and sterile. It was a large chamber with four beds, but three of them were empty; Veltol was the only patient there. Dressed in hospital clothes, he was reclined in bed, bandages wrapped around him in a way that was painful to look at. Theresia was holding her father’s hand, looking into his sleeping face.

“When I… When I hold his hand like this, his breathing steadies a little. I guess he’s tired of making that pained expression. Father never did like to do any one thing for very long.”

“…Oh… Oh yeah?”

He closed the door softly. Theresia didn’t look at him but continued speaking in a normal voice. Forcing herself to sound calm.

Wilhelm knew that Theresia was someone whose strength increased as times got worse. That’s why he knew that she must be in great pain at that moment.

“Theresia, what happened to your father?”

“…Some kind of strange magic. The man from the Empire, he—”

“A curse, apparently. If we don’t break it, your father’s life may be in danger. The ones who did it to him told us where they would be tomorrow morning. I’m going to go and—”

“I’m going with you.” Theresia was emphatic when she heard what Yactol had said. It was not, however, something Wilhelm was especially pleased to hear. He understood how Theresia must feel. But their enemies were specifically targeting the Sword Saint. He was reluctant to simply bring her along—even though he knew not to do so would be putting Theresia and Veltol to the test.

“Wilhelm, listen.”

“Theresia…”

“I was the Sword Saint. I’m still an Astrea. And the head of my family was entrapped and hurt. I have to clear away that disgrace.”

It touched on her pride as both a member of the nobility and a swordswoman of the kingdom. As Wilhelm listened to Theresia speak, he held his breath. Not because he was touched by the weight of her pride and dignity, but because, with her eyes full of tears as she tried to justify taking this upon herself, she looked even more beautiful than he had seen her before.

Still looking at him in a way that captured his heart afresh, Theresia said, “You’re a man of the Astreas, Wilhelm. The head of our family himself said so.”

“…Yeah. He did.”

“You and I are a man and a woman of the Astreas. We’ll go together.”

Wilhelm looked at the ceiling under the strength of her words. He thought briefly, before gently wiping away Theresia’s tears.

He said only, “Yeah. You’re right.”

11

Early the next morning, Wilhelm and Theresia stood at the great bridge. They had slept only a few winks, but they both felt good. Carol looked much worse, having stayed up the entire night traipsing all over the city. She was now tormented both by exhaustion and guilt over the lack of results.

“I’m so sorry, Lady Theresia…”

“It’s all right. Don’t worry. Wilhelm will handle everything somehow.”

Theresia embraced the apologetic Carol, comforting her with baseless reassurances. It was so very simple to say. Wilhelm sighed and brushed the hilt of his sword audibly.

They had only been planning on a honeymoon. Neither he nor Carol had

brought a sword that would withstand a battle to the death with a powerful enemy. So at first, he had resolved to go into battle with whatever poor blade he might be able to find.

But before he set off, Yactol, who had been dragged around the city all night by Carol, offered him a wrapped object.

"You must be Lord Wilhelm, son-in-law of the Astrea family. This is for you," he said.

"What's this?" Wilhelm asked, frowning at the weight of the package. The wrappings obviously concealed something of some length, and from the feel and heft he could guess well enough what was inside. It must be a sword.

The issue was its provenance. Why was this man giving Wilhelm a sword here and now?

"As I believe you've figured out, it's a sword. A masterpiece of a blade… When I consider what's about to happen, I simply can't let you proceed without a decent weapon."

"And I'm grateful for it, believe me, but you have no reason to go out of your way to help me, do you?"

"On the contrary, sir, I have every reason. Lord Veltol is a valued customer of mine. He found himself in a fight with another customer at my very store… All of this is my fault."

Wilhelm paused before saying, "They were targeting Theresia and her father. You were simply unlucky."

"Even so, sir. In any event, I don't give you that sword to clear my conscience. It has always belonged to you. It's just taken its time making its way into your hands."

"Come again?"

Wilhelm was taken aback; Yactol lowered his eyes slightly as he explained, "Lord Veltol ordered it from me as a gift for his son-in-law. Like the hair ornament for his wife, he selected it himself. So as I said, the sword belongs to you. It is right that you should have it, and it is not for anyone to wield but you."

"____"

"I may not be the best person to say this, sir, but…I wish you good fortune in battle."

And so he had a conversation with the shopkeeper and left with a new sword.

The fact that it felt so familiar in his hand no doubt spoke to Veltol's discerning eye. The length, the weight, everything felt as if it had been made to order. There was no cause for complaint in it, no reason for concern.

"So you got here first. Obvious though it may be to not keep one such as myself waiting, I'm still impressed."

Wilhelm and Theresia looked up when an imperious voice reached them. On the far side of the bridge appeared two figures in black, like a parody of the young man and woman waiting for them. Their enemies, Wilhelm knew at a glance.

There was a man who looked like nobility, wearing a cold smile, and a giant with four pairs of arms—Stride and Kurgan, the young wolf of the Empire and Eight-Arms himself.

"Well, you're an ugly face. The imperial nobility is even more revolting than I had heard."

Stride paused. "What's this? You've brought some kind of sidekick. I don't recall permitting just anyone to be part of this fight. You impudent dog. Don't pretend you belong here."

"It looks like you're too stupid to deal with anyway."

"Wilhelm, stop. We didn't come here to bicker."

Stride's eyes narrowed cruelly as they exchanged barbs. Finally, Theresia broke in, glaring at Stride. "Lift the curse you put on Father," she said.

"A curse, she says. He not only interferes with our duel, but he said such insolent things. Far from redemption, that man is. Even a man of this kingdom ought to know some shame…"

"Stride, check yourself. You can be too roundabout at times."

"Hmph, you have no sense of fun, man." He stopped smiling and held up his right hand. "This is what you seek, is it not?" There was a ring on each of his five fingers, and the one on his pinkie glowed a muted scarlet. It was somehow uncanny, the jewel eerily alluring.

"This is the Scarlet Finger. A magical object of considerable age… I believe in this kingdom you call them metia? So long as its glow does not dim, I can promise you your father will live. Though, of course, that is only to say that his suffering will be prolonged."

"Hand over the ring. I'll shatter that stone and break your stupid curse."

“You fool of a simpleton. Do you really think anyone will give you what you want simply because you demand it? For starters, you have—”

Stride made a shooing motion as if chasing away a stray dog, trying to put Wilhelm out of the conversation. But before he could finish his own sentence, something came flying into his field of view. It arced gently before touching Stride on the chest and then drifting to the ground.

A white handkerchief—and here, as manners dictated, a challenge to combat.

“I’ve no time for this. So I’ll make this simple. I challenge you to a duel.” In lieu of the silent men, control of the place now passed to the one who had thrown the handkerchief—Theresia. The aura of battle radiated from every inch of her, and she was glaring directly at Stride. There was no longer any hint of her girlish sweetness. There was only a cold, polished length of steel, chill enough to shatter a heart—the Sword Saint on full display.

“…So you’ve finally chosen to reveal yourself, Sword Saint. A duel—every bit as barbaric as your father?”

“Isn’t that what you want, though? You gave cause, you drew me… You drew the Sword Saint to the place of battle. I don’t know what you want with this, but…”

Stride’s cold smile seemed to become just a little hotter in the face of Theresia’s serious request for combat. Theresia’s face tightened at that, and she looked at Kurgan. “You’ve obviously come prepared,” she said. “The fact that you brought the Empire’s strongest with you is proof enough.”

“____”

“Let me ask one thing. Is the purpose of this fight really to worsen relations between our kingdom and your Empire? If it is…”

“If it is, then what about it?” Stride said.

“Then I won’t fight you for the ring. I’ll just steal it.”

“____”

She had no intention of letting this turn into an international incident.

Stride’s eyes widened at Theresia’s declaration. Then he put a hand to his mouth, murmuring, “I see,” and nodded. “Clever girl. It’s always possible that after the duel, the Sword Saint might lose her life through an unfortunate accident. But to what end? Your kingdom is under the protection of the Holy Dragon. So long as that be the case, every plan the Empire lays shall be in vain…merely a death wish.” He spread his arms wide, putting her doubts to

rest.

Stride's words were correct. Or more precisely, they were based on what was taken to be established fact.

"——" Theresia, unable to guess what exactly Stride was playing at, pursed her lips in a frown.

The Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica had made a covenant with the Holy Dragon. It guaranteed the prosperity and peace of the kingdom, and it stated that if anything threatened these—for example, if another nation were to go to war against Lugunica—the Dragon would come to their aid.

The only wrinkle was the Holy Dragon had never once invoked the covenant and saved the kingdom from danger. In the past several centuries, nothing had ever happened to warrant it. Some people had even begun to speculate that maybe there was no covenant protecting the kingdom.

Then again, if it turned out the kingdom really did enjoy the Holy Dragon's protection when relations between the kingdom and the neighboring empire reached a terminal state, then the Empire might very well be destroyed. In that case, whatever Stride did here would truly become a death wish, exactly as he had implied.

Did Stride believe in the covenant or not? Was his goal really to stir up trouble between their nations? And if not, then what in the world did he want?

"As you know, my body is not fit for the rigors of combat. As such, this man here shall be my champion. I believe you understand that much?"

As he spoke, Stride picked up the handkerchief at his feet and put it in his breast pocket. The sign that he accepted the challenge.

Theresia nodded firmly. "Eight-Arms Kurgan, the one they call strongest in the Empire. Your nation could have no better champion than him."

"And he could have no more fit opponent in the kingdom…" Stride's cold smile returned; he didn't bother to say aloud that she was speaking of the Sword Saint. His smile made it obvious that one of his aims was Theresia.

If he felt that his plan was progressing, though, Theresia stymied him by saying, "No. I'm sorry, but there's something I have to tell you. The Sword Saint cannot fight."

"…What?"

"For reasons of my own, I've put aside the blade. I, too, am unable to fight, though the circumstances are different from yours. And so, like you, I

too shall nominate a champion."

"You? A champion? Nonsense. Who could possibly stand in for the Sword Saint—?"

Stride's language became more strident as his plan veered off course, and ultimately, he was interrupted. Not by his own volition but because he was struck by a warrior's spirit that emanated from nearby.

It came from some place incredibly close—two auras wove together into a great maelstrom, and in the space of an instant, the bridge had become a battlefield.

"My gratitude. A fine enemy. I am pleased by this meeting with you."

"Shut up. All I'll say is, don't crash a guy's honeymoon and expect to walk out of it alive."

The two overwhelming presences, and the subsequent exchange, came from Kurgan and Wilhelm. Even Stride, who knew nothing of combat, swallowed heavily at the power of their swirling contest of will.

And then—

"Quite the gambit, Sword Saint."

"You were the first to abuse the custom of the challenge. What's more, I want to lift the curse on my father. What could be a more obvious way to do that than to have someone stronger than me fight in my place?" Theresia spoke proudly, her shoulders back, and finally, Stride regarded Wilhelm seriously for the first time. The young man had not taken so much as a step back when faced with the full intensity of Eight-Arms's lust for battle, and that was what made Stride finally understand. The long-haired swordsman standing there was truly powerful enough to take the sword from Theresia.

"Could there be a fighter in this kingdom equal to the Sword Saint?"

"I guess they kept it quiet," Theresia said. "It would be bad for our reputation if people knew that in the middle of her own ceremony, the Sword Saint was defeated by a mysterious interloper."

"I assumed that was a rumor not worthy of a second thought…!" The touch of anger in Stride's voice came from the realization that a story he had dismissed as frivolous talk had in fact been true. Quietly satisfied by his reaction, Theresia gently took the arm of Wilhelm, who stood beside her. It was the proof of her own faith.

"____"

A second later, a vast rumbling shook the bridge. Theresia realized

belatedly that it was coming from Kurgan's throat, and later still that it was laughter. Kurgan's shoulders quaked with the bass tones of his hilarity. And then the god of battle opened his eyes wide. "The demon of the sword, the Sword Devil, who took the blade from the hand of the Sword Saint and then took her as his wife—what is his name?"

"Wilhelm van Astrea."

"Your warrior's aura is dazzling, and the way you named yourself, radiant. Stride, I have no doubt this one is fit to be an opponent for me."

"I don't recall that being yours to decide," Stride said, looking bitterly at his willful champion. Then he cast his eye upon Wilhelm and Theresia, now drawn close together, and exhaled. "I have no objection, though the Sword Saint's nominee lacks her sweetness. Which of you becomes a stain on Eight-Arms's blade is of no consequence to me. The challenge has been accepted. Let us not waste more words."

"What do you want if you win the duel?" Wilhelm asked.

"Nothing," Stride replied, "as I am the challenged and not the challenger. Ahh, but…" He trailed off, his eyes narrowing at the two of them. Then he patted Kurgan on the back. "I have no wish of my own, but perhaps the same may not be said of my champion fighting on my behalf. There's the rub. As he has taken my place in battle, I shall grant his wish as my own."

Thus, Stride passed the victor's right to Kurgan, who crossed one pair of his arms and considered his employer's offer. Then he pointed.

Directly at Theresia.

"I claim the resplendent princess," he said.

"Huh?"

"…Say wha?"

Theresia and Wilhelm responded at almost the same time.

"Her beauty, her abilities, and her boldness, all I would be loath to set aside. Therefore, Wilhelm, when I have split you in twain with my sword, I shall make the princess mine. You do not object?"

The veins stood out in Wilhelm's forehead at this declaration that his young wife would be taken from him. "Do you bastards not understand that we're *newlyweds*?" His warrior's spirit was buoyed by a wave of simple rage, but Kurgan actually smiled at this.

Beside him, Stride nodded as if he had achieved his own desire and said, "Give up. This is the foolish custom of a barbarian nation. We have no

compunction about impregnating a strong woman to carry on our line. Thus, you shall be his prize. Will you withdraw in fear? Like your father did?"

"No, I won't."

"Theresia!"

It was Wilhelm who was disturbed by this declaration. Having Theresia herself on the line dramatically changed the nature of the fight for him.

Theresia, however, shook her head at him. "They're taking Father's very life hostage. And I don't want to be the only one who watches from safety because I can't fight. I know I can't wield a blade but let me bear some of the responsibility."

"But—if by some chance I were to—"

"Oh?" Theresia touched Wilhelm's lips with her finger, silencing him. His eyes widened, and she smiled. "You won't. There's no one anywhere stronger than you."

"____"

"You'll protect me, won't you?"

"…Yeah. That's right." Wilhelm, reminded of his vow, gave a crooked smile. The Sword Devil had only to be himself. To fulfill his duties as a fighter and a man.

Wilhelm turned to the creature who would dare to steal his bride, and to the enemy who had wounded his father-in-law with his ploy, and he bared his fangs.

"I accept," he said. "When you reach hell, tell them Wilhelm sent you."

12

As the duel began, a crowd of spectators gathered by the bridge.

In this day and age, duels were nearly sacred, like a ritual, not to be violated by any third party. At the same time, though, they were also a form of entertainment for bystanders. If all the rules were followed correctly, even bodyguards could not interfere. For those who observed the fighting from a distance, it was a safe way to enjoy a bit of spectacle.

Thus, the moment word of the duel spread, would-be gawkers and spectators flocked to the bridge, hoping for a good time.

Their expectations of pleasant frivolity, however, were shattered the

moment they saw the fighters standing across from each other.

"____"

Neither of them needed to speak, but each projected his warrior's aura, casting the crowd into silence.

The sight of the Sword Devil and Eight-Arms astride the bridge, facing each other, enthralled the entire crowd, rendering them unable to make a sound.

All, that is, except Stride and Theresia. Watching the duel but not watching it, they stood side by side, sniping at each other.

"That is some blade. Though of course it fails to shine quite like the Bright Sword."

"It was picked out by the head of the Astrea family. Of course it's impressive."

"And I suppose the man picked out by the Sword Saint must be equally distinguished. Though I can't imagine him threatening Eight-Arms. What could such a reedy little boy do anyway?"

"You wanted an even slimmer girl to fight instead!"

"____"

Theresia, with her blessing of the Sword Saint, was painfully aware of just how powerful Eight-Arms was. He was without a doubt the second-strongest opponent she had ever encountered.

There was no question in her mind that he would be defeated by one man who outranked him: her husband.

"Wilhelm."

It was not a prayer nor an appeal but simply a loving invocation of his name.

She knew that, as his wife, it was the best thing she could do.

"____"

Wilhelm felt his name being spoken behind him more than he heard it. He closed his eyes. The sound of the wind, the twittering of birds, the rush of water under the bridge, the collective breath and heartbeat of the gathered spectators—amid all this, he could focus on the voice of the woman he loved.

The way she said his name carried no doubt that he would claim victory.

Nor was her gaze anything less than certain.

It was like the morning when they woke up together and she spoke his name for the first time that day. Like when she smilingly told him dinner was ready. Like when they were spending time together and she tugged on his sleeve. Like when, in the middle of a minor disagreement, her cheeks flushed sweetly. Like when they shared a kiss before going to sleep.

She had said his name. That thought alone was enough to inspire the Sword Devil.

"For this beauty, I give thanks. My heart dances at the blessing that has been visited upon me this day."

"Blessing? You're giving thanks for the day you die? You're a weird one."

When Wilhelm opened his eyes, he saw the great bridge awash in the blaze of the morning sun, its rays lying like a mantle upon his enemy.

Now that the opponent had shed his robe, he truly did look like some creature that had evolved purely for battle: Nearly seven feet of blue skin and eight arms made for a bizarre warrior. And the head atop this unusual form boasted a face like a devil's born for war.

"So they call you Eight-Arms because of those eight arms, huh? Must be pretty nice, having all those limbs."

"It is surprisingly less convenient than one might think. An increase in the number of usable arms does not beget an increase in the number of things one can do. Above all, we are too conspicuous."

"Making you a target?"

"Quite the opposite. Few indeed dare challenge one who looks like this. It is a boring life."

It was very much the logic of a warrior who lived for battle. With that thinking, at least, Wilhelm could sympathize.

To wield the sword was, by definition, to seek power. Wilhelm himself had formerly looked to others as his reason for holding a blade. But that was in the past. Now, his reasons might not lie within himself, but they certainly were not found in some faceless "other."

"It's not worth spouting off about all that. Anyway, we don't have time. Hurry up and die."

"I intend to prolong this time of my enjoyment. All the more crucial when I have so few opportunities."

Wilhelm drew his sword. The heirloom blade selected by the very head of the house of the Sword Saints glinted with the anticipation of combat.

At the same time, four of Kurgan's arms moved, withdrawing four massive, thick cleavers from sheaths on his back, armaments appropriate to the strongest in the Empire.

"They bear the name Devil Cleavers."

"Never heard of 'em."

"They shall be the instruments of your destruction. You may wish to know their name. And your own blade?"

"____"

He thought for just a second. But he quickly tired of thinking and simply declared, "It's called *Astrea*!"

Then he leaped in.

And so, quietly but intensely, the flint was struck on the Dance of the Silver Flowers.

13

The duel went unusually long for a fight between skilled swordsmen.

"____"

Strikes rose and fell, the pace of the blows ever accelerating. The clamor of blade on blade was relentless; blood flew, the bridge cracked, and the resounding footsteps of the fighters sent ripples along the surface of the water.

It was a confrontation between soft and hard—or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say light and heavy.

Wilhelm moved furiously around the bridge, unleashing stroke after stroke in hopes of landing the killing blow. In contrast, Kurgan stood majestically where he had started, repelling the attacks of the Sword Devil with a defense like steel.

Though they might be called light and heavy, the "heavy" one, Kurgan, was still shockingly quick. He wielded the cleavers in four of his eight freakish arms with the force of a storm. If so much as the hem of Wilhelm's shirt had been caught up in that whirlwind, he would have been reduced to dust. It was only his superlative agility that prevented that from happening.

“____”

A simple butting of heads would eventually see him reach the end of his stamina. His speed would slow, and he would no longer be able to avoid the blades of the Devil Cleavers. But Wilhelm’s speed was not his advantage. Rather, it was the nerve and the footwork to get him close enough to Kurgan to strike. It was not his speed but the guts and technique to upset his opponent before closing in for the kill.

And yet, neither of them had managed to land the decisive blow.

They were similar in skill, both profoundly able combatants, and that was why this fight persisted for so long. If there had been the slightest difference in their abilities or in the stakes of this battle, or otherwise if they had been fighting in the same style, then the matter would have been settled with the first exchange.

Instead, the duel had already reached well over a hundred volleys.

“____”

Breathing harshly, Wilhelm let loose a strike, trusting to his speed. It was blocked by a huge blade, and he made a half twist of his body to escape the response. Next, there was an overwhelming flash of silver light, but it only produced a shallow nick in his opponent’s chest plate, and the brief opening allowed a blow to catch him in the shoulder.

“Hrgh…!”

Wilhelm's body shuddered under the hit; he jumped into the air to clear the sideward swipe of the blade that followed. But no sooner had he escaped into the air than he felt a chill run through him.

"Can you dodge this, Sword Devil?"

One arm adjusted its grip on a Devil Cleaver, relaxing. The massive muscles tensed, a clear sign that Eight-Arms was about to unleash a huge blow.

In the air, there was nowhere to run; he could bring his sword across to defend, but—no, the attack that was coming would be impossible to block. If it hit him, there would be nothing left. It would sever the very thread of his life.

And so Wilhelm abandoned defense.

"I rend you now, Sword Devil."

The attack as it approached was audible.

To Wilhelm's ears, it seemed every sound in the world fell silent at that moment.

"Wilhelm!"

But it was not so.

That shout, that lovely voice, that voice that touched him to his heart, became his pride, his strength, his inspiration to battle.

He abandoned defense. Holding his sword sideways, he welcomed the incoming attack. If Kurgan had released a bolt of lightning, Wilhelm would catch it upon the fangs of the wind.

An explosion of silver light enveloped the bridge, blossoming like a flower.

Blows were exchanged, and blood went dancing through the air. Wilhelm was thrown backward with the intensity of the engagement. Every bone in his body ached, and the left side of his body, which had been caught by the flat of the huge blade, complained shrilly. He might have broken his shoulder, collarbone, ribs, and hip; he wasn't sure.

But Kurgan paid a considerable price of his own in exchange.

"Superb…"

The word came out like a groan as Kurgan's huge frame fell to its knees.

The battle god didn't move from the rapidly accumulating pool of his own blood. The source of the massive hemorrhage was his third arm on the right —which had been cut clean off by the blow.

"So…it worked…"

The instant he had decided he couldn't dodge the blow, Wilhelm had focused on minimizing his own injuries while maximizing the damage to his opponent. He would use his own stroke to deflect the angle of Kurgan's attack, while taking advantage of his opponent's momentum to rob him of another limb.

This meant Kurgan now had two arms he couldn't use and was down one sword. He had sustained considerable injuries and would not be able to move easily. The same could be said of Wilhelm, but while Kurgan had only his own morale to sustain him, Wilhelm had more than that. He could draw strength from the voice of the woman who stood behind him. She provided such a reserve of power that, even now, it seemed to overflow from his heart.

However, just as he thought they were about to enter a new phase of the fight…

"So this is all you can do for me. Curse it all—the act never goes as well as the plan."

"Wha…?!"

Had this shocking pronouncement come from one of the spectators? No, none of them had spoken. It was instead someone who had done the unforgivable: transgressed the ritual of the duel.

Stride, his overcoat cast off, stepped up beside the kneeling Kurgan. This represented nothing less than the intrusion of a bystander on the duel, the breaking of a sacrosanct taboo.

"Don't you know this is a duel?!" Wilhelm demanded. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"You're on death's doorstep, boy; I wouldn't waste time sniveling. If I lose my pawn here, though, it will muddle the question of who has the initiative. As such, I believe this will do for now. You're welcome to consider the duel our loss. Come."

Wilhelm tried desperately to rise, to bring his sword to bear, but Stride merely sniffed at him. Then he removed the ring on his little finger and tossed it to Theresia. Her eyes widened in surprise, but she caught it reflexively.

The Scarlet Finger—the source of the curse—sat in her palm.

“You curs get to consider this your victory. We will cede the ring to you and withdraw. What is there to complain about?”

“It’s…a matter of seeing things through. What do you…think a swordsman is?”

“In this particular context, a piece on a game board. More broadly, a tool and nothing more. This encounter did have its benefits for me. Thus, I now withdraw. Oh, don’t worry.” Glancing down at the enraged Wilhelm, Stride held out his right hand. Though his little finger was bare, four rings remained on his other fingers. “We’ll have another four chances to play. Endless amusement. Aren’t you looking forward to it?”

“Why, you…!”

“Fool, I am joking. So laugh. I have my left hand as well as my right.”

He held up his other hand, also bedecked with rings, and Wilhelm fell speechless. The reaction seemed to put Stride in a good mood as he pointed to his left hand.

“I can’t be wasting time with the king’s men,” he said. “So I believe it’s a good moment to give you something else to think about.”

As he spoke, there was a flash of light, and then the stone bridge suddenly dissolved. It was as if all the rock had turned instantaneously to sand. Everyone who had been standing on the bridge, along with the former stone, fell into the river below.

“Dammit— Argh…!”

Wilhelm spat a curse, jumping into the air just as the bridge evaporated. He ran along as the stones collapsed behind him, shouting as he charged in Theresia’s direction. She reached out her arms to catch him, urging her husband on.

Wilhelm took a mighty leap, grabbing hold of Theresia’s slim arms. He escaped the dissipating architecture to land on the firm ground of the city itself. He let out a breath.

“Wilhelm!”

“I’m fine! But the ring…”

“I-I’ve got it right here. Help me!”

She showed him the ring in her hand, then flicked it lightly up into the air. Wilhelm tracked it with his eyes, judging its trajectory—and then with a flash of the sword Veltol had given him, he sliced it in two.

The strange glow the ring had displayed ebbed away, as if burned off by

the sunlight.

"Do you think Father is safe now?"

"The only way to be sure is to go back to the hospital. But…" Wilhelm gestured with his head at the obliterated bridge. A rescue effort had begun for those who had fallen into the river. Meanwhile, Stride and Kurgan had vanished in the commotion.

There was no way they had drowned: They had certainly fled. There was a good chance this would be the only opportunity to chase them down and find out what they were really after, but—

"Forget it. I don't want anything more to do with the likes of them. Let's hurry…to the…hospital…"

"Wilhelm?! Are—are you all right?! Can you move?"

"Don't…worry about me. I've just…lost a bit too much blood. My head's swimming…"

"And you say not to worry?! Come on, I'll carry you!"

Theresia hefted up Wilhelm, who was dizzy from a rush of blood to the head. Wilhelm tried to protest at this shameful receipt of aid, but he didn't run from her.

"I carried my father to the hospital, too. Don't think about it, just hold on to me… I don't have to be the Sword Saint to carry you, do I?"

Wilhelm, recognizing that nothing he could say would change the situation, leaned into his wife. "…Just try not to shake me too hard." Taking this trust, Theresia began running through the city with a speed few would have expected from the delicate maiden.

A few minutes later, Carol met them at the entrance to the hospital with news of Veltol's recovery, and Theresia dropped Wilhelm to the ground as she broke into tears.

14

"This was supposed to be my honeymoon. I can't believe what it's come to…" The complaint came from the person visiting Wilhelm and Veltol, the two residents of this hospital room: Theresia, her red cheeks puffed out.

After the fight, the heavily injured Wilhelm had been immediately admitted to the hospital, ultimately being placed in the same room as Veltol.

And speaking of Veltol, who had at one point been within an inch of losing his life thanks to the curse—

"What you mean, Theresia, is that you value your father more than your own honeymoon… How proud I am to mean so much to my daughter!"

"You make me want to squeeze those still-healing wounds of yours, Father, so quit while you're ahead."

"Whaaaaaaa?! Why?! Don't you love me?!"

"I can love you and still be mad at you. Wilhelm, are you sure you're going to be all right sharing a room with Father? Are you sure your wounds won't open again from the stress?"

Veltol, who had been stroking his beard with his left hand and looking oddly important, found himself roundly scolded. Theresia, however, ignored her deflated father, eliciting a smile from Wilhelm.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Your father's not so bad once you get used to him."

"You won't win me over that easily," Veltol quipped. "The struggle between you and me over Theresia will continue for as long as we live."

"I've belonged to Wilhelm for a long time now, so you've already lost that fight, Father."

Theresia's blunt remark forced Veltol into silence. It was a perfectly typical exchange for them, but Theresia seemed pleased to be able to have it. Seeing how happy she was, Wilhelm thought maybe the interruption to their honeymoon and the heavy wounds had been worth it.

Then the door to the hospital room opened, and Carol came in. "Lady Theresia, the dragon carriage will be here soon. Will you go to meet it?"

"Oh, yes, let's do that." She rose, brushing off her skirt as she made for the door.

"Dragon carriage?" Wilhelm said. "What's that about?"

"It should be obvious. I want to leave again as soon as you're back on your feet, Wilhelm, but I'm not exactly comfortable leaving Father here on his own… So, I called my mother."

"Whaaaaaaaat?!" Veltol exclaimed, thrashing in his bed. "Tishua?! No, that's too much for me! She's going to be enraged!"

"She is! And she should be!" Theresia answered ruthlessly. Then, with one last sigh for her cowering father, she turned kind eyes on Wilhelm. "I'm going to go out for a few minutes now. See you soon, Wilhelm."

"Sure. You and Carol go enjoy your honeymoon."

"I-idiot! Lady Theresia and I are not on a— You know— Ahem!"

Carol seemed to implicitly admit he had gotten her pretty good as Theresia escorted her out of the room with an embarrassed "Oh!"

With their talkative visitors departed, Wilhelm and Veltol were left in the room by themselves.

"Oh, young Wilhelm, don't imagine you've won. I changed Theresia's diapers, you know."

"I've changed her clothes as well, if you know what I mean."

"Hrgh!"

Veltol lurched back, slashed by the blade of words. Lying sideways on his bed, Veltol began to mutter to himself. "*Sigh*... First my son-in-law takes my daughter from me, then my wife attacks me for wanting to go on the honeymoon… A girl dear enough to be another daughter to me tells me to leave well enough alone… Where in the world am I going to go from here…?"

"How about you let it go, Dad? Not that I think anything you've done is especially praiseworthy, but—"

"Ahh, and now my son-in-law piles on…"

"But in spite of it all, even Theresia thought you looked awfully manly, standing up for your family like that. I fought that blue freak. I understand the guts it must have taken to face him."

In Wilhelm's mind's eye, he recalled how imposing Kurgan had been. It had been enough to give even him pause—for Veltol to confront the monster had been virtual suicide. It made Wilhelm nothing short of proud that Veltol had nonetheless been willing to leap to the challenge.

"You went a round with that thing before I did, Dad. That's pretty impressive."

"…But this ring, or whatever it was, caused terrible trouble for you and Theresia. It got you hurt and ruined your honeymoon."

"The only thing that got me hurt was my own weakness. It's nothing for you to worry about. And…"

"Yes?"

"I heard about how you got angry on my account. So…don't worry about it."

There was a moment of silence between the two men. It wasn't

embarrassment or awkwardness, as they both probably realized.

That was why the silence ended with Veltol bursting into laughter. “Very well. That’s that, then. Let’s consider us even. Agreed?”

“…You know, I think I contributed more than you here.”

“You agree?”

“…Yeah.”

As he answered Veltol’s insistence, Wilhelm swallowed a variety of emotions. He glanced briefly at the standing cabinet beside the bed and clapped his hands as if he had just remembered something. “I don’t know exactly what argument Mom is going to try on you, but it’s— You know.”

“Hm?”

“If you give her that anniversary hair ornament, maybe it’ll help her calm down?” He reached over to the cabinet and picked up the ornament from Swain’s. A gift for Veltol’s wife that he hadn’t had time to choose because of Stride’s interference. Theresia and Carol had picked one out instead and told Wilhelm to give it to Veltol.

“It was Theresia and Carol who chose it. I know maybe that’s not quite your custom, but…”

“Ah, the two of them did? Goodness… It’s so cute how they can’t tell me to my face.”

Veltol felt another self-congratulatory rush of emotion as Wilhelm offered him the ornament. Wilhelm smiled a little and went to hand it over…

“Dad?”

“…Er, oops.”

Veltol, with a somewhat unnatural motion, had dropped the hair ornament on the bed. He shifted in order to pick it up, exhaling as he collected it—with his left hand. Even though he was right-handed. His right hand seemed immobile.

Wilhelm gaped.

“…An aftereffect of the curse,” Veltol said, gazing at his right arm. “The normal course of things would have been for all four of my limbs to rot away, but that healer managed to force the decay into just one spot. He really is something. Imagine, such a capable doctor in such a remote place. When we get back to the capital, I’ll have to make a report and recommend him.”

“But…your right hand? That means…”

“As I said, Wilhelm. We’re even. You have no responsibility to bear.”

Pinned by the sight of the hair ornament in Veltol's left hand, Wilhelm was speechless. A wave of shame struck him as he realized what Veltol had really been doing in their conversation. He hadn't wanted his daughter and son-in-law to feel responsible for what had happened to his arm. To that end, he had caused Wilhelm to agree that they were even with what had seemed like a show of pique.

He was disgusted with himself for not realizing it. At the same time, he felt a rush of anger. Immense rage at the escaped imperials—Stride and Eight-Arms Kurgan. He would expunge this humiliation. He would exact payment. This he vowed in his heart.

"I will…"

"Hm?"

"I *will* settle this. I swear on your arm, Father."

His words carried all the force of his status as a warrior, spoken for the benefit of the man before him.

But Veltol only laughed and said, "I don't need any such vow. Let it go. I don't want Theresia to know about this. If you must swear something, redouble your promise to make her happy."

"Huh…"

The nonchalant tone caught Wilhelm off guard. Veltol looked as proud as if he had landed a sword blow on the young man. "This is to be kept a secret from Theresia," he said. "Promise me, Wilhelm—man to man. Family to family."

He smiled again as he made Wilhelm swear an unbreakable oath.

Until the end of Veltol's life, his daughter never knew about the damage to his right arm. And thus, until the end of *his* life, whenever Wilhelm was asked which swordsman he respected the most, he would unhesitatingly respond with the name Veltol Astrea.

And this Silver Flower Dance in Pictat earned Wilhelm two enemies who would be an inescapable part of his life.

Stride "Death Wish" Volakia and "Eight-Arms" Kurgan.

The tale of the battle that would involve both of them and Wilhelm, as

well as Theresia, and finally push the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica once more into chaos—the Battle Hymn of the Sword Devil—started here.

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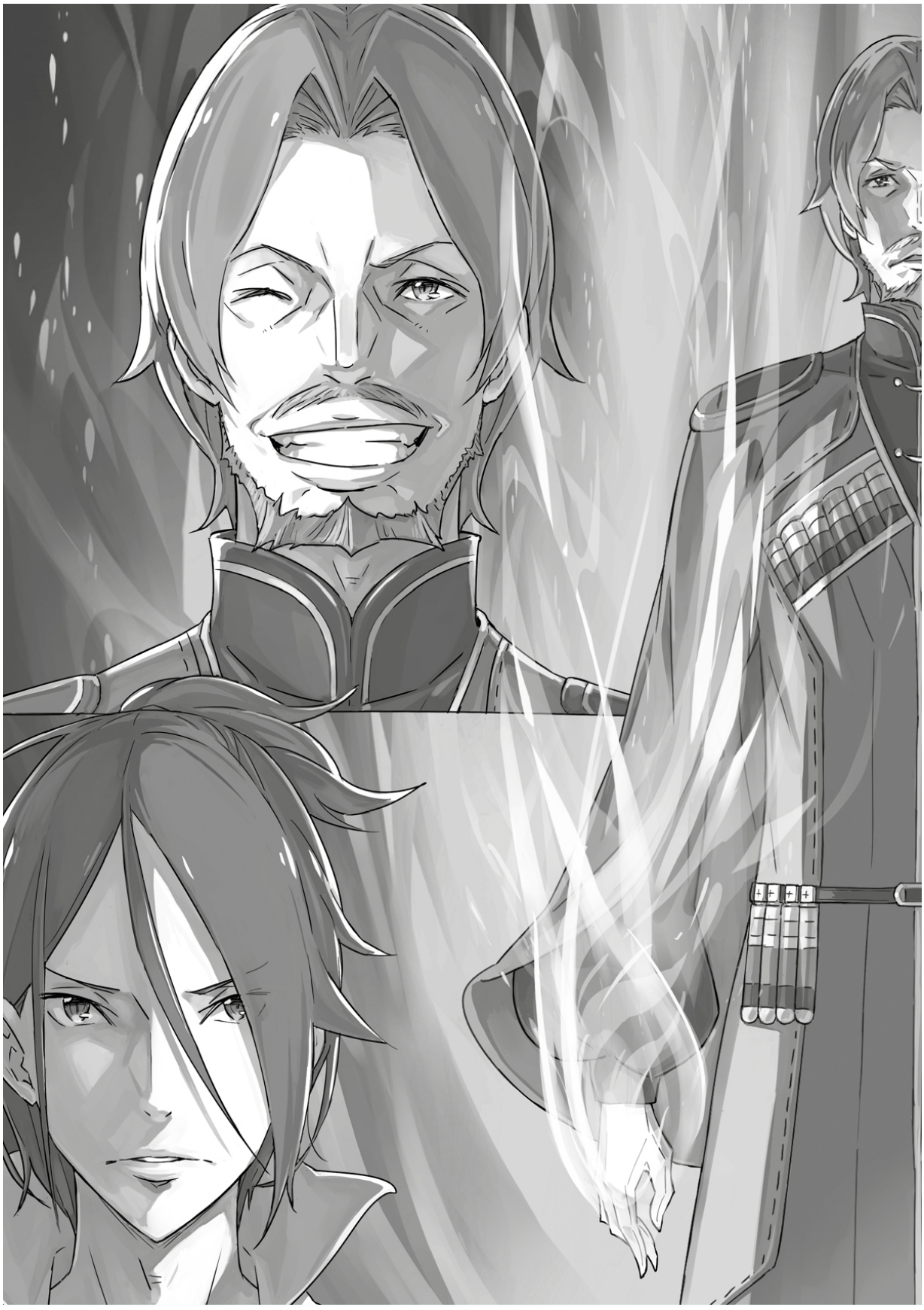


THE LOVE BALLAD OF THE SWORD DEVIL

Lovers' Interlude

1

Grimm Fauzen could still remember the moment he had fallen in love.

At the limit of his endurance, Grimm collapsed in a corner of the battlefield. In one hand he held a battered old sword, his fingers so frozen from clasping it that now he could not let it go. His arm still vibrated with the sensation of cutting off the head of the creature that had once been his friend.

"____"

It was hell. Every place on the battlefield, every time, was hell.

He regretted his own foolish decision, though it was too late. He regretted fleeing his hometown. He had been so afraid of taking over the family business in their lonely hamlet, terrified of spending his entire life as a nobody.

His pitiful wish to be a hero, the ugly ambition he had been unable to discard—this was where it had led him.

The face of his former friend Tholter, eyes empty and vacant due to his transformation into an undead warrior, was burned forever into Grimm's memory. He used his sword not out of grief for his friend's passing but out of an opportunistic impulse not to die.

The fact made the stains of blood and viscera on his hands seem that much deeper…

"It looks like I underestimated you."

The voice struck his ears, terrible and clear, making his heart tremble.

"____"

He unwittingly looked up from where he sat. And there she was, standing before him.

Her beautiful golden hair was cut short, her blue eyes were like jewels

that shone openly with her emotions, her carriage was noble, and what struck him most of all was that all of this seemed completely natural in her. She was not sweet or precious so much as she was elegant and beautiful. And her name was…

"You're Miss…Carol." His voice scratched as he spoke her name.

The girl's—Carol's—lips softened into a thin smile. "That's right. It looks like we've both had a rough time of it, um…Grimm." At that moment, the dignified impression she wore relaxed, revealing a more youthful side befitting her age.

She shrugged off her light armor, setting down the sword she always kept with her; in so doing, she looked far removed from a mature female knight. Of course, this was hardly a typical moment of idle conversation. The dry wind gusting over the battlefield reeked of blood, and Carol herself was wounded.

Yes—she must have been injured fighting the enemy.

"It's just a scratch," she said. "Nothing for the daughter of warriors to complain about."

"Is…that right?" Grimm said.

"Yes," she answered, reading the doubt in his face. "And what's more…" She looked down. Her sapphire eyes fixed on the hand in which Grimm clutched his weapon. Some complicated emotion flashed through her eyes, and then she slid into a sitting position.

"Was that the first time you've ever killed anyone?" She touched Grimm's right hand as she spoke. Her thin, pale fingers worked at his own frozen muscles, loosening them until he felt the joints begin to move again.

"Oh, um…"

"Don't feel you have to rush. You can take your time. It comes to us all. All the more so when he was your friend."

"___"

Grimm swallowed his trembling words, looking down in despair.

This was the third time he had been on the battlefield, and the first time he had killed someone at last. That is, if the undead could be killed in the first place.

And three times now, each and every time, Grimm had regretted standing upon the field of battle.

Putting his own life in danger, treating the lives of others lightly, standing

amid the nauseating stench of blood—Grimm felt nothing but regret over all of it. Every time, he discovered afresh that he had no place here…

"That was a very brave thing you did." Even as Grimm was racked with remorse, Carol was looking straight at him. "Your friend was in the most terrible possible circumstance, and you sent him to his rest with your own sword. Even if you hardly did it consciously, it doesn't change what happened. A very fine thing."

Carol seemed to be trying to reach the vacant Grimm. At the sound of her voice, at the meaning of her words, Grimm caught his breath and reflected on what he had done.

Was it really anything worthy of praise?

"If nothing else, you freed your friend from the shame of what happened to him after death, and you gave the final push that helped me and your other comrades in arms… Though I'm disappointed it also gave yet another opportunity to that crass jerk."

Once again, Carol seemed to have read Grimm's thoughts. He gazed in wonderment at her, but she only smiled. "I hope I'm not too far off the mark."

"…No! Not…at all."

"No? That's good… Ah."

Carol let out a small breath of relief. She looked at Grimm's fingers and saw his painfully clenched digits releasing the hilt of his sword.

Carol gently relieved him of the sword. Then, still holding his weapon, she got to her feet. "What?"

Grimm stumbled at her quiet question. "Er, it's, uh—" His head spun with confusion at what he himself had done.

His own hand had taken Carol's, stopping her.

It was as if his fingers were loath to let her tender touch leave.

"This is highly—"

"Th-thanks!"

"___"

"…I mean, thank you, miss."

Grimm found his voice at the very moment the warmth threatened to go out of Carol's expression. His words took the form of gratitude, but it was blindingly obvious that this was just a lame excuse.

Carol's eyes were wide at Grimm's exclamation.

"…You're a strange man, Grimm."

She furrowed her shapely eyebrows, but her lips formed into a smile.

From that moment onward, Grimm Fauzen belonged to Carol Remendes.

2

Fear of the battlefield never waned for Grimm. War was hell; that conviction never lessened. There was no field of battle that was not hellish, no battle he fought without terror, no life that deserved death, but countless many that went to it.

He hated fighting and never once felt that he was cut out for it. Everyone around him agreed, and they never hesitated to tell him so.

Grimm understood that it was its own type of kindness. Why would someone so unsuited, someone who could never conquer the fear, continue to struggle on in hell? If he had decided to quit, surely none of his companions would have stopped him.

No, they would have seen him off as he went back to his hometown, relieved smiles on their faces.

With just one exception: Wilhelm Trias.

"You still alive, dumbass? If you have time to sit around staring like the dead, then get the hell out of here."

The Sword Devil, the one capable of unparalleled feats in combat, growled as he found Grimm struggling along on the battlefield.

There was no lie in Wilhelm's words. He spoke not from any kindness or consideration but from the absolute belief that the weak did not belong on the battlefield and that Grimm would only get in his way.

"As if I could! Wilhelm, why are you always so—?"

"No time for stupid chatter, either. Look, enemy reinforcements." Ignoring Grimm's objection, Wilhelm raised his blood-soaked blade, then went charging off in the direction of the opposing force, as quick as the wind. Grimm's eyes went wide, and he practically tore his hair out as he called, "Ahh, crap! Wait! Wilhelm, wait for me!"

He ran off after Wilhelm, drawn once more into a battlefield teeming with enemies; he brought up his shield.

The fear never went away. He wasn't suited to battle. War was always hell.

Yet somehow, Grimm could never run from war. Instead, he kept pressing forward, following his brother in arms. In that moment, the thing he feared most was that a day might come when he would be able to follow no longer.

"If you try to act like *him*, I don't think it matters how many lives you have—it won't be enough."

Carol, visiting Grimm when he was giving himself first aid, looked exasperated.

It was immediately after one of the skirmishes that characterized the encounters between Zergev Squadron and the demi-human forces during the war. This battle had included another of Wilhelm's overwhelming displays, so it had been a fairly easy victory with relatively few casualties for their side. That Grimm was counted among that minor number was to his shame.

"…I can't watch this," she added. "Give me that."

"Oh, uh, sorry… Thanks."

Carol took charge of the treatment from Grimm, who had been unsteadily trying to bandage his own dominant arm. She briskly wrapped the dressings around the slash in his right shoulder. It took her just a few seconds; to Grimm, it made his own incompetence stand out all the more.

"It's a matter of being used to it," Carol said. "Even I couldn't wrap my own favored arm very well."

"…Is it that easy to read me?" Grimm asked, touching his own face.

Carol's eyes widened slightly as she said, "Yes," and nodded. "I'm not sure why. You're oddly… Your face is easy to understand, I feel like. Maybe…"

"Maybe what?" Grimm leaned over, eager to hear what Carol would say.

Carol, sensing his interest, shook her head gently. "Maybe someone so easy to see through doesn't belong on the battlefield."

"Oh, that again…"

Carol was surprised to see Grimm so deflated.

"Don't worry," Grimm said with a tight smile. "People tell me I shouldn't be here all the time. I even say it to myself a lot."

"So why do you stay?"

“I don’t know.”

The question was a natural one, but Grimm looked off into the distance. Carol looked over her shoulder, following his gaze. Then…

“Does it have to do with that man Trias?”

Grimm was staring at the Sword Devil, the one who had stood on the front lines of this fight and returned without a scratch. The sour-looking boy reclined, seeming bored, closing his eyes to get a little rest.

Grimm smiled at the prickle in Carol’s voice. “I wish I could say it had nothing to do with him, but that probably wouldn’t be true… I hope you won’t be too annoyed with me for saying that.”

“____”

“Um, I just don’t want that awful, sword-obsessed idiot to leave me behind.”

Saying it out loud, this motivation sounded so ridiculous that Grimm found he could almost laugh at himself. Wilhelm walked his own path, an intense and lonely road on which no one could approach him. That was the wellspring that fed his strength and made him who he was.

Yet, for as aloof as Wilhelm was, he had saved Grimm’s life three times.

“I don’t think Wilhelm even knows it. I doubt he thinks I owe him anything.”

“Well, then…”

“But not me. He saved me.”

He couldn’t overcome his fear: He would always hate fighting, and war would always be hell for him. But on that same vicious battlefield, Grimm had been rescued by a brother in arms—though that very man might not have realized it himself.

In this brutal place, amid the awful spreading battle, where Grimm’s heart was tormented by terror, only his comrades kept him safe, protected his life.

“If I only said thank you to him, I’m sure he’d just sneer at me. Mumble something about not getting too chummy. So instead, I’m going to make him understand.”

“Make him understand?”

“I’ll fight until one day he’s glad I was there—glad his brother in arms was there to help him.”

The most earnest words of gratitude he could muster would never really reach Wilhelm. So he would wait for the moment when the feeling he wanted

to express could get to the other man's heart. He would wait, watching like a hawk.

"When the time comes, even Wilhelm should be able to see how thankful I am. Then I'll tell him, 'Now we're even.' That's one reason I keep fighting."

"___"

"Oh…"

Carol was struck speechless to learn Grimm's secret ambition. Her reaction left Grimm suddenly embarrassed by his own confession. What a humble and womanly wish he had expressed.

Carol, however, with trembling lips, said, "…It looks like I'm still underestimating you."

"Oh, er, uh… No, I-I'm sorry to bore you—"

"Hardly… Do you really believe…that he'll change?"

Grimm stopped halfway through his apology. He had been caught by the earnest look in Carol's eyes.

"___"

She was silent, awaiting Grimm's answer. To him, it felt like she wanted an answer to something else. Like she was seeking some kind of help from him.

In a flash, he recalled something she had said when they'd first met. *Something about being someone's servant and fighting in the war on that person's behalf.*

Did this question, perhaps, hint at some sort of feelings for that someone?

He felt a dim pain pierce his heart. But he put a hand to his chest, ignoring the feeling, and said, "Yes, I believe he will change. Anything, anyone, can do it with enough time, if they want to."

"___"

"I've actually reached the point where I can hold a conversation with Wilhelm, you know? Maybe someday we'll even be able to go out and get a drink together or something." He spoke almost jokingly, but it was something of a front. The reason being the change he saw in Carol's eyes.

He saw the anxiousness in those beautiful sapphire eyes clear away in an instant. Whatever reservations she had had about this person she held dear, his words had cured them. He could almost hear his friend Tholter, now dead in battle, shrugging and saying, *You do one dumb thing after another, huh?*

He could be dealing with someone who was effectively his rival for

Carol's love, and here he had provided aid to the opposition.

"…A person can change. With time and desire, anyone can…" Carol repeated Grimm's words of assurance. The strength came back into her voice as she spoke. Finally, her breath steadying, she looked Grimm square in the eye.

"I'm with you."

"Huh?"

"I want that for you. I'll be happy if your wish comes true."

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brimming with hope.

"___"

Grimm felt his pulse quicken. Then again, he knew those eyes and that expression weren't directed at him, and he castigated himself for acting as if they were. This had to be something else. There was already someone Carol cherished. As for him, they had only seen each other on the battlefield a few times. What could such a beautiful woman ever want with—?

"Hrm? That's…" Carol muttered as Grimm looked at the ground, confused. He looked back and saw that she was looking once more over her shoulder, and that her face was once more dangerous. The source of her suspicion appeared to be a tall, slim woman talking to Wilhelm.

"There goes Lady Mathers, talking to him again…"

She brushed off her knees and stood up. The woman she referred to with such deference was Roswaal J. Mathers, a royal mage. Both her clothing and her speech could generously be described as unusual, and she frequently appeared in the same places as Zergev Squadron, where in addition to helping turn the tide of battle, she often spent time teasing Wilhelm.

She had a reputation for being rather troublesome, but as her recklessness resulted in his routine meetings with Carol on the battlefield, Grimm was privately thankful to her.

Carol, however, was not taking the encounter between Wilhelm and Roswaal lying down. "Pardon me, Grimm," she said. "I have to go work."

"Oh, o-of course! I'm—I mean, I'm fine. You did a great job."

"___"

Carol squinted at him for a moment, considering his off-kilter answer. Then, glancing at the oversize shield leaning against the wall beside Grimm, she said, "Do you intend to learn how to use that?"

She seemed very serious, so he looked at the shield, too. "Miss

Carol…?”

“Grimm, if you really mean to survive this civil war… For that matter, if you mean to stick by Trias and Captain Zergev…the way you’ve been fighting is dangerous.”

“___”

“So if you want, I would be willing to teach you how to use a shield. Although… How do I put this? I must admit, I’m not fully studied in it myself yet.”

“—! Will you really?!” Grimm all but jumped to his feet. He couldn’t even have wished for this offer.

His reaction surprised Carol, but she quickly nodded. “Yes. Let’s make some time, then. I think I should be able to spare a bit back in the capital.”

“S-sure. Thank you very much. I look forward to learning from you!” He bowed his head several times, deeply grateful to Carol. Of course, he had to be careful not to mistake her intentions. She was only offering out of kindness. Still, he more than welcomed any sort of progress, either in his wish for his comrade or in the attempt to spend some time with the woman he adored.

He was clenching his fist in happiness when Carol said, “By the way, maybe I’m reading too much into things, but…”

“Yes?”

“The person I serve is a woman. Please don’t get the wrong idea.”

That was it. That was all she said before she turned on her heel and headed over to Wilhelm and Roswaal. She spoke sharply to them, breaking into what appeared to be an argument.

But Grimm, watching from a distance, was struggling desperately to understand what he had just heard.

“I…I must not…misunderstand her intentions…but…”

But was it really a mistake? The question whirled around and around in his head.

He couldn’t shake the sense that elsewhere in his mind, Tholter was grinning mischievously.

3

And so began a series of meetings replete with gratitude, hope for the future,

and perhaps the slightest of ulterior motives. Outwardly, they were shield-training sessions to help keep Grimm alive. But in fact, they were far more intense and brutal than anything he imagined when he heard the simple word *training*.

"There!"

"Ouch! Ow, ow, ow! Miss Carol, that hurts!"

"It's going to do a lot more than hurt on the battlefield! You just lost all your limbs!" Carol shouted. She was holding a wooden training sword with which she had just smacked each of Grimm's hands and feet. He had dropped his shield and was now hunched in pain in front of Carol.

Carol wielded the wooden sword as if it were an extension of her body, attacking Grimm with quick changes and flowing movements. Unable to follow her blade with his eyes, he had suffered dozens of blows, and his body was ready to break.

"You've gotten a lot better, but there are still too many inefficiencies in your movements," Carol said, sitting down next to Grimm. "Someday you're going to run into a really powerful foe, and then you're going to be overwhelmed." She let out a soft breath, then gently wiped the sweat from her forehead and wet her lips with her tongue. Each gesture was dignified in its own way, and Grimm was smitten with the way Carol looked in profile.

Thus, for a time, Carol helped toughen Grimm up. They would meet at the training grounds in the capital, and Grimm would get to spend several hours training with her one-on-one.

Bordeaux had actually praised Grimm for becoming able to hold his own with a shield. Grimm was heartened by his words and felt he had begun to make some progress in his shield work, but clearly, he still had a lot of rough edges. Carol seemed to find openings in his defenses everywhere, and in a real battle would probably have been dead a thousand times by now.

"From what I've seen," Carol said, "I feel like your movements are a lot better on an actual battlefield."

"Oh. I wonder if it's thanks to that weird feeling I get at the nape of my neck." Grimm touched the back of his neck, offering his own sort of hypothesis.

This "feeling" was a sort of sixth sense for danger that Grimm himself didn't quite understand. When he faced an enemy on the battlefield, or when he felt one nearby, a shock of fear would run along his nape. By listening to

it, Grimm was able to wield his shield far more skillfully than his training would suggest. Then again, perhaps he never would have managed it without Carol to raise his overall level of ability.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that," Carol replied. "It implies the energy I put in here is nothing like a real battle."

"Th-that's not what I meant at all! I just, uh, how do I put this…?"

"I was just joking. You don't have to get so upset." Carol's lips softened into a smile, and she turned her kind eyes on Grimm.

He clutched his head, pathetically muttering, "Dang…"

He suspected she could see right through him, knew exactly what he was feeling. The fact that she nonetheless continued to keep these appointments meant either that she thought he was all right, too, or that she was very devoted to keeping her promises. Although he liked to think that, by this point, he knew she was about more than just etiquette.

"Miss Carol, I just can't win with you…"

"Grimm? What did you say?"

He quickly smiled and tried to cover for himself. "Oh, I…I just thought that maybe the reason I can't ever seem to defend myself from you is because I'm like an open book to you."

"I see," Carol said softly. "It's true your expressions have never been difficult to decipher. Maybe your face is just especially open to me… I guess we go well together."

"What?!"

"Oh, nothing," Carol said, a flash of mischief in her eyes. "…You really are easy to read."

She jumped to her feet, then politely reached down to Grimm.

He debated for a second whether or not to take her hand—then grabbed it before he could talk himself back out of the idea.

"I feel," Carol said, "like even if you couldn't speak, I could still understand you."

4

Carol apologized desperately for the comment as she came rushing into Grimm's hospital room.

"I'm sorry…! I'm sorry, Grimm… I…!"

She came to his bedside, apologizing tearfully. When he heard the pain in her voice, Grimm opened his mouth to say something, anything that would stop her tears. But—

"___"

Only a raspy breath emerged from his mouth; he was unable to form meaningful words.

The battle at Aihiya Swamp, an engagement fiercer than any other in the Demi-human War, had just ended. As part of Zergev Squadron, Grimm had been on that battlefield, where he had found himself confronted by Libre Fermi, one of the bannermen of the Demi-human Alliance. The unit had been drawn into a merciless fight.

With the battle almost over, a flash of Libre's twin blade had torn into Grimm's throat. The stroke cut through the organs he needed for speech, and Grimm lost his voice. The doctors at the hospital had already declared that he would most likely never speak again.

Carol blamed herself for Grimm's injury and was tremendously distraught. As if a casual remark from a training session many moons ago could have been the cause.

"Grimm?"

He smiled at the hoarse, tearful voice speaking his name. Carol was safe with him, and at this moment, that made him happy.

Yes, it hurt to have lost his voice. To know he would never speak her name again. But even so, he was glad that at least, in the fires of that hell, he had not lost her.

He had already lost one comrade in arms. Someone to whom he owed a great deal. The battlefield had stolen that person from him. His own powerlessness had resulted in death. All the more reason—

"—Ah…" *I'm so glad you're safe*, Grimm thought from the bottom of his heart. And Carol, who had always known what he was thinking better than anyone else, understood immediately. She raised herself up slowly, looking at him with moist eyes.

He felt he would never get tired of looking upon her face and drinking in her beauty. He no longer believed he was misunderstanding the reason her eyes were wet, the reason she looked at him. They no longer needed any excuses.

Indeed, Grimm now pulled Carol to him.

"—!"

Carol caught her breath, surprised for an instant, but then she leaned into his chest. When she looked up at him, he bent down to steal a kiss from her lips.

She didn't resist.

As the kiss ended, he hoped she would see in his face how much he loved her.

The thought crossed his mind as he hungrily held her warm body close.

5

The days and months passed, and much happened to Grimm and Carol. The fight in the castle that turned out to be the turning point of the Demi-human War; the debut battle of the Sword Saint, which caused Wilhelm to desert the army; and the second battle at Castour Field, which led to the ultimate conclusion of hostilities.

And then there was the intrusion of the Sword Devil on the armistice ceremony, and the defeat of the Sword Saint.

"That absolute, utter, complete fool of a man! You'd think in two years he would have learned *something*!"

The Sword Devil had burst into the ceremony, overwhelmed the Sword Saint in a display of strength, and then was promptly arrested and thrown in the Prison Tower by a brigade of knights.

It would not have been possible for anyone else to do something so stupid and so grand, and Carol was resolute in her appraisal. Grimm could only smile wanly at his infuriated lover. He himself had, after all, been involved in the capture of the Sword Devil after the man's impossibly audacious behavior. They had hardly gotten home before Carol started griping, and Grimm smiled without quite meaning to.

"Grimm? What exactly is so funny? Did I say something *amusing*?"

Not funny. More like…predictable, maybe.

"Hmph. You mean you knew I would get angry?"

You tell me, teacher.

He scribbled quickly on a pad of paper he produced from his bag, teasing her.

In the more than two years since he had lost his voice, he had gotten quite used to this way of communicating. Of course, Carol, who had only gotten even better at guessing his thoughts, had already puffed out her cheeks and annoyance before he finished writing.

It had been some time since they had begun to show each other their emotions so openly. At that moment, though, she looked more natural to him than at any time in the past two years.

Are you happy Wilhelm is back?

"Am I—? What are you talking about! Y-you're the only one in my heart, Grimm…"

Sorry. I meant happy for Theresia.

"…I think you meant exactly what you wrote." Despite the quick appearance of a second sheet of paper, Carol pouted and glared at him.

Fully satisfied with his beloved's adorable expression, Grimm noticed afresh how remarkably relieved he was himself. He clenched his jaw, forcing his teeth to stop chattering.

Wilhelm, who had been missing for two years, had returned. He was as good a swordsman as ever—perhaps better, in fact. Good enough to claim victory over the Sword Saint at the ceremony. The Sword Devil was truly home. He had come back to rescue the heart of Theresia, the woman who meant everything to Carol.

"Anyway! We can't just wait around here! Somebody has to go and inform that idiot just how stupendously stupid he is! And that's our job, Grimm!"

What about Lady Theresia?

"I can't imagine my dear, sweet-hearted Lady Theresia would so much as scold him. She needs me!"

It was not a hope but true conviction that powered this declaration. The relationship between Wilhelm and Theresia must be just as she said. As certain as the fact that Grimm loved her.

He himself had more than a few pieces of his mind that he wanted to give Wilhelm. They both wanted the same thing.

"Let's go, Grimm! I'm sure Lady Theresia will take him back to her house… And that's where I'm going to let him have the two years' worth of anger I've been saving up!"

She reached out her hand, and he took it with that same small smile. She was ready to dash out the door, but he pulled her back, just for a moment.

In that moment, he wrote down the feelings he hadn't had a chance to express at the interrupted ceremony.

That dress looks beautiful on you.

Let us move on without detailing Carol's exact reaction. When she and Grimm left the ceremony hall, though, her face was very red indeed.

6

As the wedding concluded, Wilhelm and Theresia shared their first kiss as a married couple. From the pews, Carol leaned on Grimm's shoulder and wept openly.

Zergev Squadron had miraculously arrived in time for the ceremony, but all of its members were in a sorry state. That included Grimm, whose armor and uniform, after three consecutive days of use, could only be called unhygienic at best.

Carol, though, with her (filthy) beloved once more at her side, could not have cared less. The beautiful bride, Theresia, felt exactly the same. Both their chests swelled with pride.

With the exchange of vows and then of a kiss, Wilhelm and Theresia were at last officially married. Even His Majesty the King had attended, albeit incognito. No one present objected to the union. Of course, no one except the bride's father had ever held much against it.

"Oh…Lady Theresia, how beautiful you are…" Carol was unable to hide her joy and emotion at the sight of Theresia in her bridal gown; she was completely transfixed. Grimm felt a touch jealous, but on today of all days, he could let it slide.

No one needed to explain to him how immensely important Theresia was in Carol's life. They were like sisters, or even closer, and her feelings on this day must have been truly intense. Grimm himself was equally relieved to see Wilhelm get his wish. Though maybe he wasn't quite as emotional about it as Carol.

"____"

With the vows and the kiss, the ceremony proper was over. Still, the proceedings dragged on with features someone uncharitable might have considered superfluous: Bordeaux, representing the new groom, gave a speech; Veltol, as the father of the bride, related some memories of his life

with his daughter, though he predictably broke down in tears.

Finally, when everything was over, Wilhelm and Theresia left the chapel together. Everyone applauded them and offered their blessings. And just as the couple was about to leave—

"Carol!"

"Wha?!"

The bridal bouquet arced through the air and landed neatly in Carol's startled arms. Tossing the yellow flowers Theresia had been holding was the very last of the wedding customs that had to be observed. It was said that whoever caught them would be the next to find lifelong happiness…

"Oh…"

Theresia winked puckishly, and Carol went red in the face. At that moment, the applause in the chapel shifted away from Wilhelm and Theresia and thundered for Carol. Nearly overwhelmed, she grabbed Grimm's arm, but this only caused the well-wishing to intensify.

"G-Grimm, uh…"

His lover didn't seem to know quite what to do, but Grimm winked, too. On the far side of the applause, Theresia was smiling happily at them, and Wilhelm had a foul look on his face, as if to say he was giving Grimm a little payback.

You're gonna be the next one standing up there, he seemed to be saying.

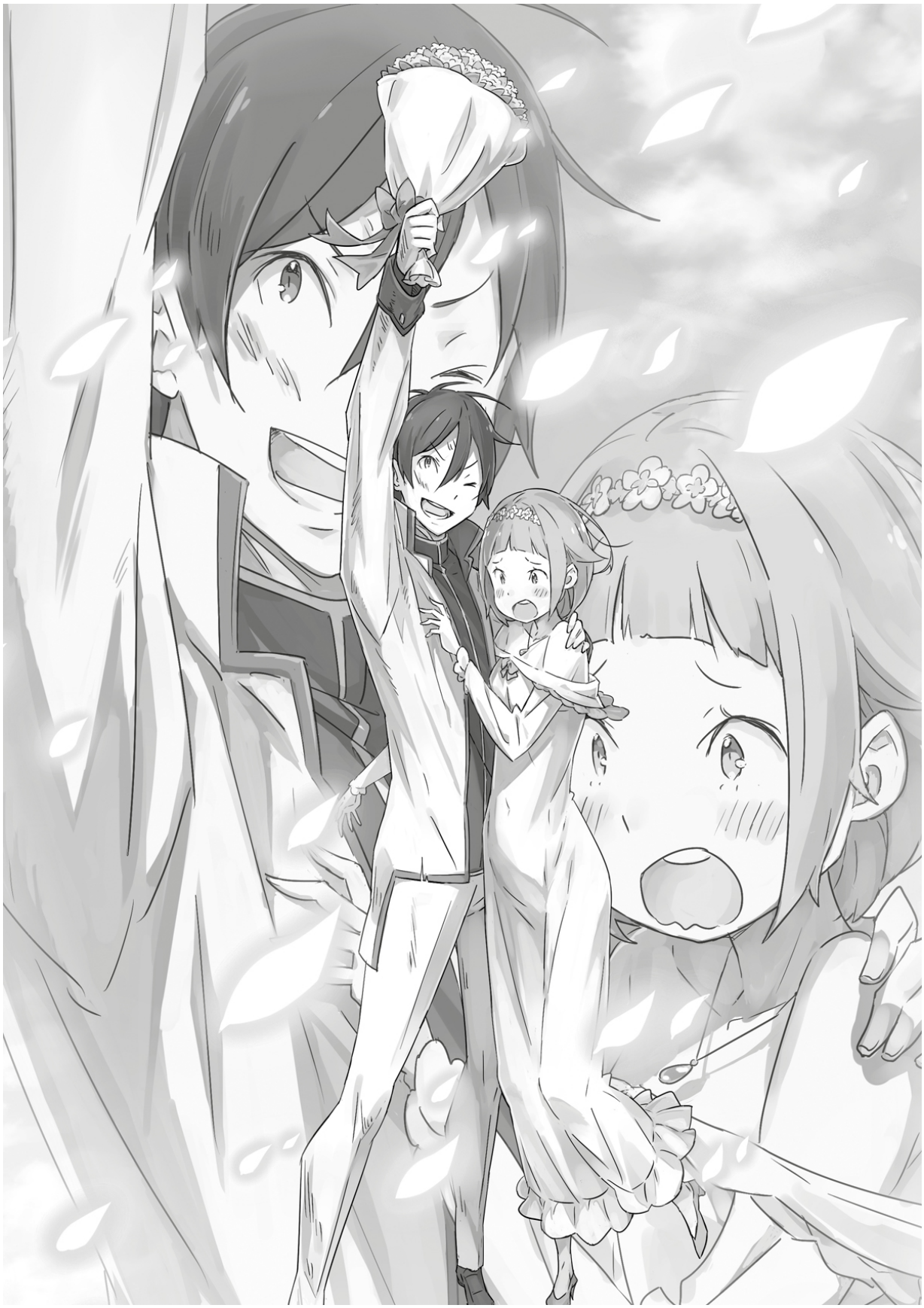
"____"

Grimm wrapped his left arm around Carol then, with his free hand, he grabbed the bouquet from her and held it over his head for all to see.

There was an instant of shock among the onlookers, but then everyone glanced at one another and burst again into applause. The lover of the maiden who had received the bouquet had held it aloft. That could only mean one thing.

Theresia put her hands to her mouth, and Wilhelm raised an eyebrow as if ever so slightly surprised. Bordeaux laughed uproariously, Miklotov smiled, and King Jionis clapped harder than anyone. Veltol, gripped by the fear that someone he thought of as a daughter was going to be taken from him, broke down crying once more.

Carol leaned into Grimm, still blushing. "Grimm, you…dummy," she mumbled in her sweet voice. Her complaint was soft, but he picked it out clearly amid the applause.



7

"I swear, I never know what you'll do next," Carol said, shooting a recriminating glance at Grimm as she sat on the bed. The ceremony was over, and they were in a private residence in a corner of the commoners' quarter as night fell upon the capital of Lugunica.

The room was Grimm's bedroom, and the building was his house. Grimm was the vice-captain of Zergev Squadron, a distinguished and well-regarded unit. Bordeaux had already judged that Grimm should no longer have to spend nights at the garrison but should have a house near the castle, and the result was this building. It gave him access to everything he needed to have and do, making his life easier. And it also just so happened to make it easier to steal time with Carol.

"I used to worry about how some of the other knights and guards looked at me."

Their secret rendezvous weren't as frequent as all that, but the life of a man with a beautiful lover could be tough in its own way. Grimm had long been engaged in a secret battle of his own to keep any of his far less qualified and devout competitors from getting their hands on Carol. He wasn't about to tell her about this particular struggle, and anyway he would soon be amply rewarded.

"You've had a long…well, more than just a long day, Grimm. Come over here."

He had bathed and changed clothes, and now Carol patted the bed beside her, blushing faintly. He sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her slim waist. Their lips met without the need for another word.

At these times, when it was just the two of them, Grimm hardly even carried his writing brush. It was enough just to see each other. Grimm savored the pleasure of knowing that Carol was right, that words were not the only way to communicate their feelings.

Suddenly, reminded that he was with someone who communicated *her* feelings with the sword, he burst into laughter.

"…Oh, Grimm, look what you've done. A little apology won't be enough for this." Carol was thoroughly incensed at having been hung out to dry in the middle of the kiss, the mood between them completely spoiled. She refused

his apologetic expression and turned away from him in annoyance.

He put a hand to one of her cheeks, pressing a kiss onto the other.

"Hrn, no. You're not getting off that easy." His princess remained angry, but he wouldn't back down from this challenge. Her ears, her neck: He showered her with kisses.

"Ah, hey, that tickles… No fair, no fair, I said!"

Carol wriggled under the tickle of his lips, the stiffness in her cheeks finally giving way. Then, at last, a smile came back over her face, and a burst of laughter announced her surrender as she rolled into his arms.

"…Strange that such a brave heart should live in such a slim chest." Her lips brushed against that same chest, her voice sweet and vulnerable.

She was usually so careful to present herself as self-assured and strong; no one else saw this more sentimental side of her. Even Theresia wasn't privy to this look on her face—it was for Grimm alone.

"____"

At their first meeting, she had helped to keep his heart from shattering completely. Then she had entertained his outsize ambitions without a hint of laughter.

She had mourned the loss of his voice, had become his lover. Over the course of two years, she had watched over him until he could at last forgive himself. And then he watched her catch those flowers, receiving everyone's blessing.

"…I'm not quite ready to be Carol Fauzen yet." She smiled, guessing what was in his eyes as he looked down at her.

At this rate, it seemed he wouldn't be able to hide even his intention to pop the question. He resolved to be careful, to make sure he could at least surprise her for that. It was all so he could make this person, so dear to him, happy in every way he was able.

And so ends the dazzling interlude in the story of the Sword Devil and the Sword Saint, of the joining of a man and a woman. This, too, is another important part of the tale of the Love Song and the Love Ballad of the Sword Devil.

<END>

AFTERWORD

Hi, hello! I'm your author, who is also a gray cat, Tappei Nagatsuki!

Thank you so much for picking up *The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil*! If through hard work and dedication you've managed to read all the way to the afterword while standing there in the store, I congratulate you! If you had spent that time working a job instead of reading, you probably could have paid for this book, am I right?!

Now then, this is indeed the afterword, and while the main series usually features a two-stage, densely packed afterword, this is a taste of something different.

It's so bad that the author's father complains he needs a microscope to read the afterword or something. Having your parents read the actual story is one thing, but somehow, knowing they're reading the afterword, too, is sort of sweat inducing…

Okay, enough chatter. Let's talk about the book.

The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil, collected in this volume, takes the *Re:ZERO* short stories that were serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive*, reorganizes them a bit, adds some new material, allows me to fret over how much my writing used to suck, and then lets me reread them to discover that, actually, they're not half-bad… As you can see, it's been an emotional roller coaster.

This is already the third volume of *Ex*, a series that puts side characters into the spotlight; including the short-story collections, we're now up to six full volumes of side material alone—*Re:ZERO* is really filling out! That makes a grand total of twenty-two *Re:ZERO* novels. It's turning into a proper epic.

Your author believes that one of the great pleasures of such a lengthy series is getting to explore the background of characters who appear in the

main story. Wait, am I repeating something I said in the last *Ex*?!

Never mind. I'll say it as often as I want. All hail prequels!

Wilhelm has now found himself in the limelight several times, being as he is a character with a lot of important background. He's already featured in two of these books, and I have plans for a third. Lucky guy. And while this may be a side story, it's still *Re:ZERO*, so you can be sure something bad will happen to him!

Nonetheless, this was a lighthearted, rollicking book in which Wilhelm got to propose (after a big fight), get married (after a grueling military mission), and go on his honeymoon (where he had to fight one of his most powerful enemies). Good times all around.

We're into the fifth arc of the main series, in which Wilhelm has a role to play, so hopefully reading *The Love Ballad of the Sword Devil* will give you even more enjoyment of the main books!

If you have any friends who insist they only read the main series, please encourage them to check out the side stories, too. Authors don't like to present information and then just leave it on the table—they like to use it. So I guarantee people who have read everything will have more fun!

So, after that excellent bit of side-story promotion, it's time for the acknowledgments!

To my dear Editor I: Considering that *The Love Song of the Sword Devil* mostly came about because I said to myself, "I wrote it, I might as well send it," it's sort of surprising to find ourselves doing a second volume of the Sword Devil series. I hope you'll stick by me for the next volume as well!

To my illustrator, Ohtsuka, I know I say this every time, but I love your character designs! You even add characters I didn't specifically indicate, so there's such great variety in your illustrations. I thought Kurgan looked especially awesome in this volume! Thank you again!

To my designer, Kusano, the cover of this book featured more characters than any other in the series, but you still rose to the challenge with an excellent, clean design. Thank you!

And, as it happens, the timing of this book coincides perfectly with the blindingly brilliant antics of Old Wilhelm in the third arc of Matsuse's manga adaptation! Thank you for such an intimidating but cool Wilhelm!

I'm also deeply indebted to everyone on the editorial team at MF Bunko J, my proofreader, all the booksellers, all the sales staff, and lots of other people! Thank you, everyone, for all your support!

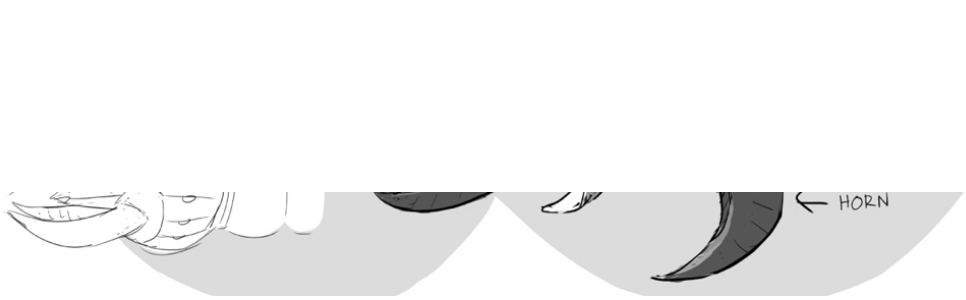
I've also once again been favored by everyone on the staff of the anime OVA. As I mention at the very back of the book, the Sword Devil series is actually going to get a manga adaptation. I don't have the words to thank everyone involved. Let's keep moving forward together!

And last but certainly not least, my greatest thanks go to all the readers who continually support and encourage me.

So then, hoping to see you for the next of these little chats—ciao!

May 2018
Tappei Nagatsuki
(Tired at the end of a long day of redecorating his room.)

CHARACTER DESIGN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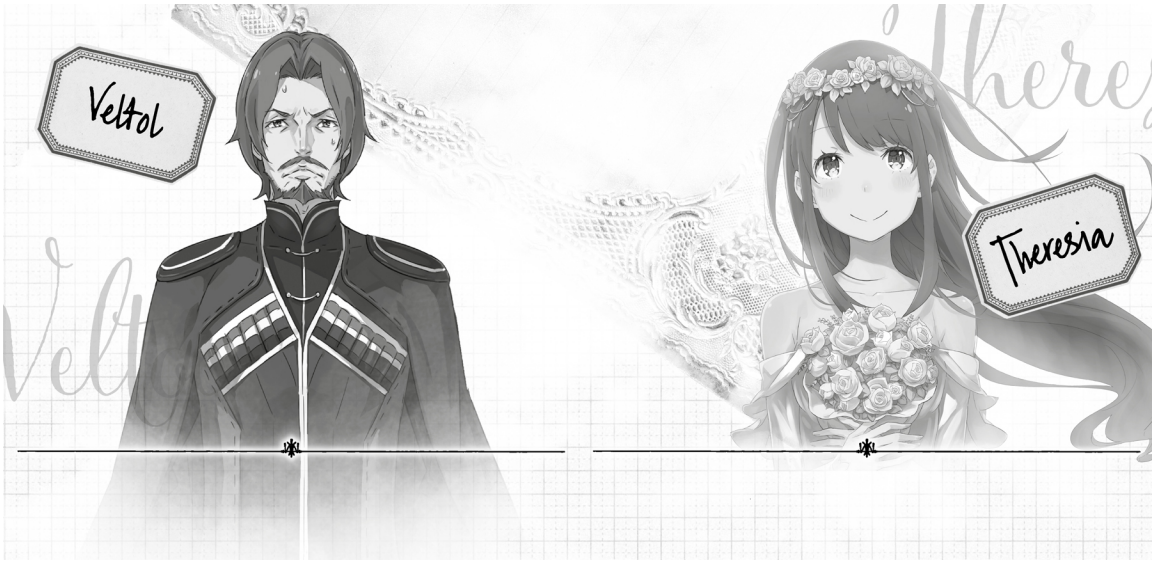

“Okay, time for everyone’s favorite, the preview corner. It’s where two of the most memorable characters from the book bring you all the news, but…”

“Heh-heh-heh. What’s wrong, Theresia? You’ve nothing to be anxious about. Or are you feeling shy? I don’t blame you. You’re here with me, after all.”

“Sure… I’m just disappointed I had to be paired with you, Father, and not Wilhelm or Carol.”

“What?! Disappointed?! Aren’t you thrilled?!”

“I can’t imagine why you think I would be, Father… Right, we’d better do the news! We have to do our job so I can get home and make dinner.”

“Mm, hiding how shy you feel, I see. Theresia, a word of advice. Your father doesn’t much like potatoes, so consider that when you’re planning tonight’s soup…”

“For starters, the next thing coming out will be *Re:ZERO*, Vol. 17, and that’s planned for August. It’s set long, long after this book, and a much older Wilhelm appears in it… You know, my Wilhelm is so handsome, even when he’s older. Don’t you think he’s cool, Father?”

“Whaaat?! You’re asking *me*?! I don’t have the guts to praise my son-in-law quite so openly!”

“Uh-huh, I know. Also, an anime OVA will start screening theatrically on October 6, 2018. I’m so excited to see how those kids playing around in the key art will look when they come to life on the big screen.”

“Ahem. It has also been decided that the MF Bunko J Summer School

Festival 2018 will include a *Re:ZERO* performance. All your favorite cast members will appear, and I fully expect it to be very exciting. Stop by for a look!"

"Why are you trying to sound so tough, Father?"

"Did I say something wrong, Theresia?"

"No, nothing. Oh, I've got some more big news! *The Love Song of the Sword Devil*, the story of how Wilhelm and I met, is going to be turned into a manga! Keep your eye out for announcements about the details—believe me, my heart is pounding with excitement."

"Hrr! I do want to see my dear, sweet Theresia, but knowing Wilhelm is going to steal her away… I'm not sure how to feel…! Whatever shall I do…?"

"I'm just excited to see how cool Wilhelm's going to look. Hee-hee!"

"Argh! Tishua! Tishua! Theresia is picking on me!"

"Oh, Father… Mother is just going to tease him again. Will he ever learn?"

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